

## Irascible

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# Irascible

by [bigasstrees](#), [rivai-lution](#) ([stethoscopesandsigs](#))

## Summary

Detective Erwin Smith is a family man, first and foremost. He goes to church on Sundays, he has a wife and two beautiful children, and is well-regarded by his neighbors and coworkers alike. Sure, every man has his secrets, his struggles between himself and the Lord, but Erwin has never known any man whose waters run as dark and deep as Levi's, his mysterious new partner. With Levi's arrival comes a new breed of monster leaving a trail of dead children in its wake. The clock skips a beat and before Erwin knows it, life will never be the same. A storm is coming to Southern Louisiana, the forgotten children of God have known it for a while now in their crack-houses, truck stops and the thick of the woods. The sky grows dark around the body of a little boy in New Iberia and the wrath of irascible men threatens to tear the world right open.

Eruri, Southern Gothic, True Detective-inspired, 1990's setting, Crime Solving, Dark.

## Notes

This is going to be a multi-chapter "True Detective" inspired Eruri AU. Fans of both SNK and True Detective will see a lot of both canons in the story and the characters, but mainly this story is about Erwin and Levi, both raised in the South, each broken in their own ways, bad men who keep other bad men from the door. This story is set in the Deep South in the mid-nineties and will include, among other things, **homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, violence, sex, BDSM, infidelity, racism, sexism, MENTIONS OF: sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, and murder**. Some of the victims of this violence will be children. I say this to make sure that all of my readers are aware of what they are getting into. This is not a happy story. The plot is pitch black and set in the Southern Gothic tradition. This is your warning.

A word on pairings: This is an Eruri fic, but it's not going to be....quick. They have some pretty serious issues in this fic and it's going to take awhile, but I promise there will be some serious Eruri goodness...also, there will be some other pairings as the story progresses, but I am not tagging any that aren't written out in detail.

Beta'ing has been provided by wolpertingersandwhiskey who has been completely incredible and has done an amazing amount to make this fic the absolute best it can be without compromising style; a gifted editor indeed!

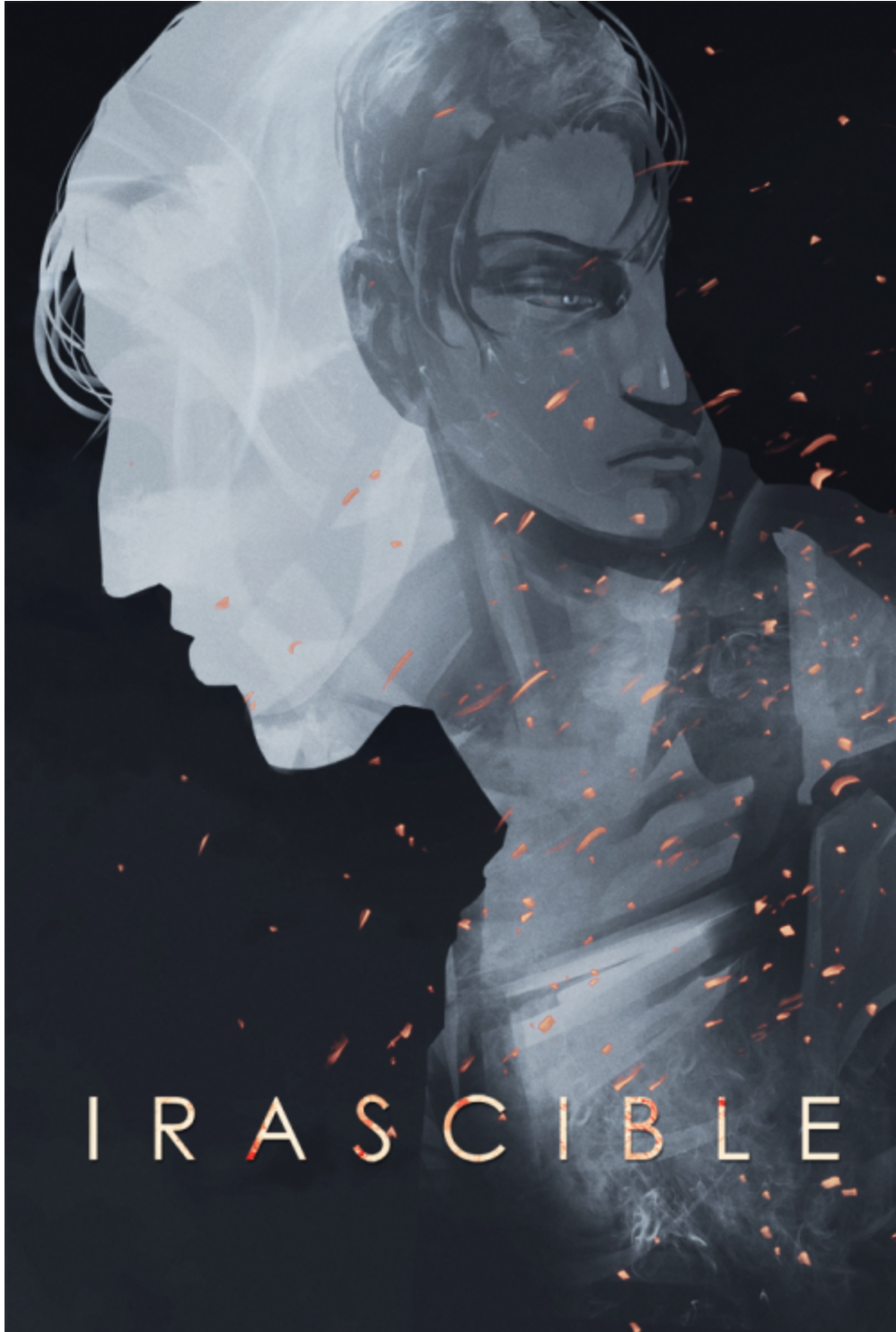
Enough of my yammering! I really hope everyone enjoys!!!

(My 8tracks mix for this fic can be found [here](#).)

# Hindsight

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



*Fic cover by [35grams](#).*

He breathed. For now, that was all he could do, drawing air into his lungs as shallowly as possible, thankful for the clouds that hid a quicksilver moon and the endless ambient song of the Arkansas woods. Levi would have scoffed, but Erwin felt that nature was on his side. He waited. He blinked. His eyes focused on the cabin door. He remembered Levi's words.

*Don't get jumpy, Smith. Don't get cocky either. Don't you dare come through that door until you know you've got the situation in hand, understand?*

He had understood. He thought that he heard the dull thwack of a fist against flesh. There were at least four men in that room...he winced. This time, he was sure that it was a punch he'd heard, maybe to the face, maybe to the gut, the sound was too obscured to tell. His hand twitched. There was no telling what shape Levi would be in by the time he got there. It was true that Levi wasn't any stranger to pain, but how much was he supposed to take? How was Erwin just supposed to stand there like some dumbshit coward, hiding behind a tree in the woods? He'd let himself get pulled into this psycho web, he'd promised Levi he would follow the plan; there could be no backing out now.

An impact. A groan. Erwin flexed his hand, ground his teeth together, his jaw tight. *Don't you dare come through that door*, Levi hissed in his head. He had to wait. This was all about opportunity now. Timing. If he fucked it up, this cicada song would be the last he'd ever hear. He held perfectly still. He waited. And for some reason, with that backwater night music sounding more and more a dirge, he thought of the day he'd met Levi.

Erwin couldn't be sure if meeting Levi felt momentous because it was, or because he had imbued it with some deeper level of meaning later, but the moment that he first clapped eyes on the detective felt as though it carried a weight that nothing else in his life ever had. The thought struck him with an undercurrent of guilt...there were moments that were far more momentous, of course — his wedding day, the births of his daughters — but they lacked the critical mass of Levi's entrance into his world. They were momentous, but expected. They didn't invert everything about him in one broad stroke, which Levi seemed to do without even trying. He still couldn't be sure that he didn't regret that meeting, especially now as the tension radiated off his body, swallowed by the muggy darkness of the Arkansas hills.

He didn't even know the full scope of Levi's plan, just that he was supposed to be able to get into that cabin, take on five men, and get Levi out of there...along with one of his captors. A big man, a blond, a death's head tattooed on his neck. The whole situation was so stereotypical that it was hard for Erwin to believe that it was even real. These tweaked-out thugs, their backwoods meth-cooking cabin, their bulging veins and trucks and confederate flags and the incongruous crosses around their necks. Like a hillbilly's fever dream...

A door creaked. Erwin stiffened. Three men emerged, stomping about the porch, lighting up cigarettes, muttering to one another. This was it. He had to take all three of them as quickly and quietly as he could. He pulled in a breath, pushing the image of his daughter's faces from his mind. When he was a boy, his pop had taught him how to bow hunt. Hunting with a bow meant blending in with your surroundings. It meant silent movements and careful camouflage. It meant now he could melt in and out of those woods, unknown to any but the cicadas and frogs. He extended the baton in his hand and began creeping closer to the men who laughed, who took swigs off a bottle of cheap whiskey, who puffed away on their

smokes. He was fifteen feet away. Ten. Five. He was taking in a deep breath. He was hoping it wouldn't be his last. He was launching himself into the men. He was praying to a god he wasn't even sure he believed in that he wasn't too late.

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### *Nine Months Previous...*

"...so this bitch, hand to god, was out of her god damn mind. I mean completely crazy, like a cat in heat, maybe worse. And she's throwin' herself all over me, and here I am, just trying to carry a drink back to Marie, but she won't fuckin' let up, all rubbin' up on me, you know, and I mean, she was hot, like, don't get me wrong, she had these nice tits hangin' halfway out and her dress barely covered her ass, but hey, I'm a happily married man and I ain't tryin' to change that, you know? So I'm all "Ma'am, ma'am, please, I'm sure there's someone else here wants a dance wi' you, but I gotta girl already, ma'am, ma'am," and all tha sudden, outta like...nowhere, man, like *nowhere*, there's Marie just barrelin' up and sluggin' away, just knock-out brawlين', I aint never seen a woman brawl like that, hand to god! I was so shocked I just watched it all happen, but god damn! I never thought my baby could move like that!"

"You know, Dawk, it's a wonder they didn't partner *you* with Nana, since you're so into your ass bein' saved by women."

"Shut the fuck up, Ness, it was hot, and besides, I don't need a fucking woman to save me," Nile paused, his eyes catching Nana's who had one pale brow raised.

"I'll keep that in mind, Dawk," she said flatly.

"Shit, Dawk, you better hope that skinny ass of yours never lands in hot water on Nana's watch, now."

"Shut the fuck up, Zackarius. I didn't mean any offense, Nana."

Nana laughed and shook her head, "If I had a dollar for every time I heard that in this place, I would retire to the Myrtle Beach and let ya'll rot up in here with your paperwork and your goddamn hillbilly tweakers."

"Maybe you should start a jar..." Mike offered with a grin.

"You know, that ain't a half-bad idea," Nana winked back, shooting a significant look toward Nile.

"God damnit, stop givin' her ideas," Nile grumbled, looking vaguely distressed, "I got braces to pay for."

"Then you better stop pissin' people off, huh?" Erwin shrugged and winked at Nana, slipping into the conversation and out of his jacket as he tossed a grin at Mike. "Mornin', ya'll. Did I miss anything important, or did Dawk do all the gabbin' this mornin'?"

“Pretty much just Dawk. You bring the goods?” Mike asked, shaking his shaggy hair out of his eyes.

“How could I forget? I think ya’ll would rip me limb from limb without that baker’s dozen. Brenda’s got ‘em up at the front.” Erwin shook his head with a chuckle. “Cops eatin’ donuts. Ya’ll know that’s...”

“Like a bad joke,” Nana said, rolling her eyes, “Yeah, you tell us every damn morning, Smith. Get some new jokes.” She patted Erwin’s arm as she slipped toward the front desk, continuing, “Stop bringing them bearclaws and I’ll stop eating them, promise.” Erwin shot her a smile, shrugged. “Hey, you know I just like to keep ya’ll happy.”

“Nicest guy in the place, aren’t ya?” Mike smirked.

Erwin opened his mouth to reply, but Nile interjected, “Wait,” and then in a slow drawl, eyes wide, “Who the fuck is that guy?”

Erwin followed his gaze over to the boss’ office door, where he caught sight of a man he’d never seen before emerging next to the Sergeant. At least, he thought it was a man, though he was short, like a child, his suit ill-fitting, like something he’d found in his daddy’s closet, complete with a terrible tie. His hair had been brushed into something resembling a bad Sunday-School haircut, but it was too long and stuck out around his ears. He looked like someone’s surly teenager who’d been brought to work and told to try and fit in, to try and behave. Nile was snickering. Mike was inhaling. Erwin was intrigued.

“Can’t get a read on him from here,” Mike said with a shrug. Erwin nodded back to him, his eyes slipping up to catch the Sergeant’s.

“Smith, c’mere,” Pixis said with a small smile. Erwin nodded, shot a raised brow at Mike, and obliged.

As he walked closer, he tried not to stare, but it was difficult. That small guy in the bad suit stuck out like a sore thumb. Was it his first day on the job? Was he even a detective? Still Erwin smiled, gave a solid nod as he drew closer. “This,” Pixis started, gesturing toward the small man, “Is Detective Levi. And Levi, this is Detective Erwin Smith. Your new partner.”

Erwin offered his hand with a smile, tried not to react to the way that it swallowed the other detective’s hand, tried not to react to the expression on Levi’s face which he assumed was supposed to be a smile. “Pleased to meet ya,” he smiled around his words, “You from around here?”

“No,” Levi said in a voice that was, in Erwin’s opinion, shockingly low.

Silence hung heavy over them for a moment, long enough for Erwin to notice his new partner’s fine bones, sharp features, light grey eyes and dark lashes. Long enough for him to feel uncomfortable, awkward, to question what he should possibly be saying to break the moment and, furthermore, why this Detective Levi wasn’t volunteering any information. Finally, Pixis cleared his throat, and Erwin’s eyes snapped up to meet his. Pixis just smiled benignly and nodded toward the bay of desks in the middle of the room. Erwin nodded.

“I’ll uh...I’ll show you to your desk. There’s donuts too, if you want them.”

Levi nodded, and after one more look at Pixis, Erwin turned and walked toward the desks. Levi followed after him. “It’s uh. You look young, you been at this job long?” He asked, turning around just in time to catch Levi muttering “Longer than you think.” Erwin nodded, his stomach churning with something uncomfortable. “Ya know, it wouldn’t kill you to be... friendly. I mean, I don’t know where you’re from, detective, but folks ‘round these parts? They have a...neighborly attitude. Just...so you know.” Erwin stopped in front of his desk and gestured to the empty desk across from his. Levi walked toward the desk and then turned toward Erwin with a grimace.

“Look,” he said, looking pained, “My last assignment was...different. Sorry. I’m just no good for shop-talk.”

“Yeah, alright, just...you don’t want folks thinkin’ you’re...unfriendly, ya know? Anyway, this is your space. There’s a typewriter for paperwork, and you can always ask Brenda at the front if ya need anythin’. People ‘round here are friendly, so ya don’ need to worry, just ask for whatever ya need.”

Levi nodded up at him, and then, as if on second thought, offered a, “Thanks, detective.”

“Just...call me Erwin. Or Smith, I don’ care, ya don’t gotta be formal, I mean.”

“Alright Smith. I’m just Levi, then.”

Erwin nodded, smiled, and sat down at his desk. He thought about offering the name of the local tailor, but figured that could wait.

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“Oof, Christ, I been gone no more’n’a day an’ you’ve already grown? How did you do that, huh? You been eatin’ your Wheaties?” Erwin let himself be hauled down by soft pale hands, calling out over mirthful giggling. He found Evelyn’s ribs and tickled them as she giggled and shrieked for help from her little sister Stephanie, who pounded ineffectually on Erwin’s back and screamed right along with her sister. Erwin gave a roar and turned, tickling Stephanie now as Evelyn took her turn climbing all over him, pulling at his ears and kicking at him while she shrieked, “Daddy stop! Bad Daddy!” over and over again. Finally, they all lay in a heap on the floor, Erwin breathing heavily and looking up just in time to see his wife’s smiling face. “Hey there,” he said, returning her smile with one of his own. “Smells nice in here, baby, what’s cookin’?”

“Steph had soccer practice until five, I just picked up a chicken from the deli.” She smiled, reached a hand out to help him up off the floor. “How’d your day go?” and then, before he could respond, she was telling the girls to go wash up for dinner and taking off his coat. Erwin waited until the girls had run giggling down the hall, and fixed his wife’s big, brown eyes with his own. “Well, it’s better now that I’m home,” he offered smoothly. Jackie swatted at his arm. “You can turn off the charm, Erwin Smith, I’ve known you long enough to see when your eyes are tired, you know. What happened?”



“Ah, ya got me,” he smiled, following her into the kitchen. “It wasn’ a bad day or nuthin’, jus’ got a new partner is all.”

“I was wonderin’ when they’d replace Nile. How’s he doin’ with Ness?”

“He’s ‘is usual lovely self, near as I can figure. Thanks, babe,” Erwin accepted the beer she held out to him, popping the tab as she opened her own.

“So, tell me about ‘im,” she urged, brows raised. “Is he cuter than you?”

Erwin laughed, nearly spitting out the beer in his mouth. “Like I would know. You women got your own ways about that. Ask Nana. Anyway he’s...quiet. And strange. I’ve never seen a fella so small. And he needs a tailor.”

“Sounds like a delight.” Jackie smiled and took a swig of beer as the girls came running in, arguing about something or other. Erwin let his mind wander as Jackie settled the girls down and got them to the table. He really was tired, Christ. When did he start feeling so...old?

“Come on, you, the girls are hungry,” Jackie shuffled him toward the table and Erwin complied, reaching over to rub Evelyn’s white-blond hair as she squealed. “Enough, you two. Dig in!” Jackie opened up deli containers of mashed potatoes, corn, gravy, and a rotisserie chicken. Erwin was just glad to eat. He found himself wondering, briefly, if Levi had a family. He was so quiet and morose, it was hard to imagine him interacting with children at all. As Jackie and the girls chattered on about their days, Erwin tried to imagine how quiet, how solitary his life would be without them, and felt a momentary pang of sympathy. His pop had always told him a man’s value was in his family. Erwin couldn’t help but agree.

“...your new partner for dinner, you know,” he tuned in to Jackie just long enough to catch the end of her phrase.

“Huh?” he asked, shaking his head.

“You need to bring him over for dinner. Your new partner.”

“Oh man, Jacks, I don’t think he’s gonna be a...good guest. He’s weird, ya know?”

“Still,” she said, firm, “He’s your partner and we’re gonna have ‘im over, so find out when he can come. It’s the right thing to do, baby.”

She had a *tone*, and Erwin chose to let it go, hoping he could put her off for at least a little bit but knowing it was useless to fight.

“Alright, alright. I’ll...talk to ‘im.”

“Good. Now Stephy, why don’t you tell your daddy about that goal you made today?”

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“He’s fucked up, mark my fuckin’ words,” Nile hissed across the table. They were in the break room, the door closed, but the walls were thin and no one wanted to be heard. “He

barely talks, his suits look like he done scraped them off the bottom of the bargain bin at the damn Goodwill, an' Mike says he smells funny."

"I didn' say funny," Mike protested weakly. "I said he smells like an ashtray in a' empty room."

"Seems pretty fuckin' funny to me," Nile spat out, standing to pace. "Where he come from anyway, Smith?"

"Why should I know? He don' talk to me anymore'n'ya'll."

"Then he don' fuckin' talk at all," Nile muttered. Erwin had nothing to say to that, it was more or less true. They had been partnered up for two weeks now, and aside from talking about their cases, which had been minimal, Levi had barely spoken to him at all. Most of the time he was punching away at the keys on his typewriter, but once or twice Erwin had looked up to catch him staring off blankly, his face more unguarded and expressive than Erwin had been prepared to expect. Perhaps those moments were a glimpse behind the veil...Erwin couldn't possibly be sure, but one thing was undoubtable; Levi was different. He wasn't like them. He didn't even remotely fit. Not here, and Erwin privately thought, not anywhere. He was one of those folks that really didn't fit anywhere, and it was unsettling to the folks who did.

"Well, I'll tell ya what, Dawk, he's a sight smarter 'n you'll ever be. So just...keep it to yourself, okay?"

"Yeah? Tell me, Smith, he carry that big ole' sketchbook with 'im on all your calls?"

"Sure does," Erwin smirked, "I'll admit, that shit's pretty fuckin' weird."

"Right?" Nile puffed up a bit, now that Erwin seemed to be on his side. "He's like some fuckin'...like them fuckin' audit guys, when they come in here'n fuck with us once a year, them IRS guys."

"Like a tax man," Mike offered with a small smile.

"Like a *tax man*, yeah!" Nile was gaining steam. Just then, the door opened, and Levi walked in. Erwin shared a quick look with Mike, who looked away.

"Hey there, Taxman," Nile smirked. Levi stared at him for a moment, then turned toward the coffee machine. "Why you carry that big ole book aroun', anyway?"

As if he hadn't heard Nile's question at all, Levi reached for a mug, poured himself a cup of coffee, and mixed in a fairly generous amount of sugar, but no cream. Finally, just as Nile was opening his mouth, Levi turned and fixed him in his gaze. "I like to gather data," he said simply. "You never know what'll end up being important later." Then he walked toward the door. Just before he slipped out, he turned and let his eyes fall on Erwin. "The Taxman," he said, a bare twitch in the corner of his mouth. "Not bad."

One way or another, the nickname stuck.

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“Just got a call from the local force. Smith, you and Levi are on this one. Potential homicide, juvenile victim.”

Erwin felt his stomach sink. *Juvenile victim*. The worst phrase in the English language, as far as he was concerned.

“Steel yourselves, this one ain’t pretty. You’ll have to drive on over to New Iberia. They got the tech people on the scene already. I’ll send you more while you drive.”

Erwin nodded, tight-lipped, and began gathering his things into his briefcase. Levi grabbed his State Detective jacket, which had been specifically ordered to accommodate his size, and a small black bag. “You driving?” he asked, looking up to meet Erwin’s gaze, mouth set into a grim line.

“Why not,” Erwin shrugged. A minute later, they were out. Most of the ride was spent in their usual silence, with Levi scanning the countryside as they drove, Erwin fixing his gaze on the road. Juvenile victim. A kid, murdered, a kid with a family and parents, a kid just like his own. The thought of it made Erwin sick. He had seen no end of sickos in this line of work, but there was something different about the involvement of a child. It was true that he thought about his daughters in these moments, but it wasn’t even just that. A child was... something sacred. Something not to be desecrated by the evils of men. Not having that barrier, whatever it was, that kept you from hurting a child...Erwin thought that could be the true definition of evil.

He tried to keep quiet, but something was burning in his gut, and the closer they got to New Iberia, the more he felt like it had to be asked. Finally, as they passed the sign welcoming them to the town of New Iberia, Parish Seat of Iberia, Erwin couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Look. I...I dunno what kinda cases you took ‘fore you came here, but you ever...you ever seen a juvenile homicide?”

Levi was quiet for a moment, his eyes fixed out the window as the town rolled past. “If you don’ find me to be competent...” he started, but Erwin cut in, “No, look, no it’s not that. You always turn in your paperwork on time and carry your weight. I just. Kids are...it’s different, man, it ain’t easy, you know?”

Levi turned and looked at him then, his eyes hollow, face set. “I know,” he said simply. With one look at the way his features had become dark and drawn, at the way his mouth was pulled tight and his neck strained, Erwin knew that Levi was no stranger to these scenes. He nodded, grimaced, and took a turn to the left, pushing away the all-too-familiar feeling that he didn’t know Levi at all.

Five minutes later they were parking on a tree-lined street, cordoned off with police tape and surrounded by curious neighborhood onlookers who were being shuffled about by harried officers as they demanded answers. Levi was the first one out of the car, grabbing his black bag and his oversized notebook while Erwin internally cursed the crowd and the local police force who hadn’t been more aggressive with keeping them away. They didn’t need the sensationalism. Finally, he stepped out of the car as well and caught up to Levi, who was making for the police chief. The chief was a man that Erwin new, though vaguely. Being

dyed -in-the-wool law enforcement around these parts meant knowing everyone, at least vaguely, and as the man turned and caught Erwin's eye, he breathed a visible sigh of relief.

"Detective Smith!" he exclaimed, the relief in his voice tempered by the grim set of his lips. "I was wonderin' when you boys'd show up. Where's Dawk?"

"Back at the station's my guess. I'm partnered with Detective Levi now. Levi, this is Chief Ames."

The chief looked at Levi for the first time, his eyes having skipped over the small man before. He stared at him dumbly for a moment, then shook his head. "Yeah, pleased ta meet ya, or as much as I can be, considerin'."

"Pleased to meet ya," Levi muttered, giving the Chief's hand a solid shake.

"Alright well, ya'll come over here and get to workin'. Victim was found by a neighbor, seems like a rush job. Evidence of strangulation and uh...sexual assault. We wouldn'a called ya'll but...we have reason ta 'spect this may be a... "racially motivated crime," ya'know."

A few years earlier, it had been mandated that all hate crimes were to be handled by the State Police, based on the theory that they were less likely to bring their racial biases to the jobs than the local precincts. Erwin had heard the shop-talk around the station and wasn't sure he bought it. Crime didn't have a color, but officers did, and juries did, and State Police were just people anyway. At the end of the day a white officer and jury were going to look after their own first, that was the way of things. As far as Erwin was concerned, he mostly just did his job like anyone else. What else was there to do?

"What made ya'll think that?" Levi asked. He was always more talkative on a case, and was already scribbling in his sketchpad.

"Well, the kid's got...some kinda cream on him real thick? I didn' know whatta make of it, but my deputy Jardin's wife is uh...well, she darker n'she'd like ta be, an' he says tha' kid smells jus' like her whitenin' cream. It's a real unique smell, ya'know? Kid's a spic, ain't many of 'em 'round here, so it uh...it sticks out, ya'know?"

Erwin nodded. "I think we know, Ames. Try'n keep these fine folk back away as much as ya can, we're gonna do our best ta get cleared out, but we need some space, alright?"

"O'course, Smith. Ya'll take ya time, we doin' what we can here."

Erwin nodded and turned to find Levi pulling latex gloves from his small black bag. He looked up and Erwin nodded. He wasn't in a big hurry to examine the body, and didn't mind getting more information from the responding officers while Levi investigated the boy.

Levi made his way over to the body, a boy no older than five, dark hair and cinnamon-colored skin, crusted over in places with the white cream. His eyes had been closed, and Levi scribbled a note to himself to find out if he was found that way. Officers should know better than to disturb a scene, but these small-town outfits weren't always used to these kinds of cases, and sometimes a dead kid could overcome sound logic. The boy was crumpled in a

heap, like a piece of garbage tossed away, forgotten. The mental image sent a surge of anger through Levi, but he swallowed it away, scribbling it into a note to be examined later. The boy was on his side, his neck marked with classic signs of strangulation and sitting at an odd angle, but when Levi peered at his wrists, there were no ligature marks to be seen. His hair was only a few inches long, and blew slightly in the breeze, giving the impression that he could wake up any moment, but the part of his face sitting on the road was purpled where the blood was settling. Levi made notes about lividity, about the cracks in the boys lips, about the bruising that seemed to have formed around his eye prior to death. He was wearing a red, yellow, and blue striped shirt, little jean shorts, Goodwill sneakers with a cartoon hero on them. His shirt was ripped, his mouth clamped shut. Levi took it all in, scribbling notes, sketching.

Erwin came over, his face going a bit pale at the sight, his stomach dropping. He'd had to get used to bodies a long time ago, but he wasn't so hardened that it didn't affect him at all. He figured the day his stomach didn't churn, he'd probably need to quit the force. He cleared his throat, looked up and shook his head before willing himself to look back down. "Alright, Levi, what do you got?"

"Position of the body and the scrapin' on his face indicates he was tossed from a higher location, probably a car, mos' likely out the back of a truck or van. He was killed by stranglin', but he was beaten 'fore that, at least ta' the extent that 'is eye got bruisin', not long 'fore he died. Possible defense wounds on 'im too, bruisin' on the arms, dirty fingernails, could be blood, we gotta test 'em. Killer didn't tie 'im up though...no ligature marks far as I can see. He can't'a been here more'n'a few minutes...fifteen or so, 'fore he was found. We gotta canvas the neighborhood, somebody saw sumthin', I guarantee it. It'd be best we could keep a lid on the uh...race issue, for now, people'r gonna be more cooperative they think this'a neighbor kid and not the kid from the help. My guess is...he struggled 'fore he died, the rip in 'is shirt looks fresh, jus' like 'is bruises'. I'd like ta know what kinda sexual assault we got goin' on here. My guess is he wasn' 'sposed ta struggle. Caused a bigger stink than the murderer thought he would, got dumped here'n'stead of a more...discreet location."

Erwin nodded throughout Levi's monologue, inwardly impressed; it was the largest number of words he'd ever heard Levi string together. He hadn't known the man was capable. "One thing's botherin' me," Erwin started.

"The cream," Levi said with a nod.

"Why...why is he puttin' lightenin' cream on the kid jus'ta kill 'im? Don't make a whole lotta sense if ya ask me..."

"It don't, 'cept if you consider..." Levi pursed his lips, nodded, "'Cept if you consider he might'a wanted'a save 'im for later, somehow."

"Yeah," Erwin nodded, "'Cept if you consider that."

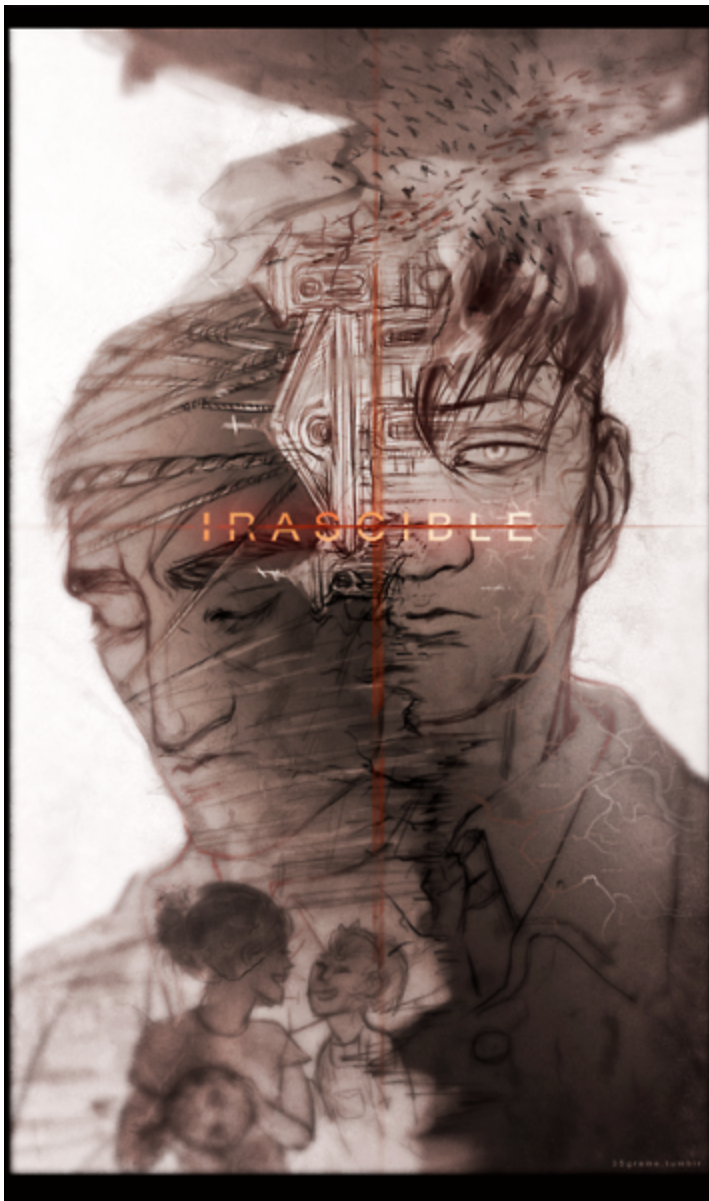
"Erwin," Levi said, sketching wildly in his book, "I'm thinkin' we might have ourselves a serial."

Erwin scoffed, shaking his head. “What’s ta say he ain’t the first? Where’s the fuckin’ evidence? Judgin’ by the way it’s been botched up, I’m thinkin’ we got ourselves a new guy here. I ain’t sayin’ he’s not a *potential* serial, but this piece’a’shit ain’t...experienced.”

“Nah,” Levi shook his head. “This ain’t no new guy. I’m tellin’ ya, Smith, he had a plan, he fucked it up, he panicked. Plain as the nose on your face.”

## Chapter End Notes

Original fic cover by 35grams:



# Smoke, Specters, and a Moonless Night

## Chapter Summary

“Good work, detective,” Erwin said, smiling as he returned to his typewriter. If Levi muttered something about just having his eyes open unlike anyone else in this god forsaken state, Erwin didn’t hear it.

## Chapter Notes

Wow wow, this fic has definitely gotten more attention in it's first week than I expected. I guess that content warnings didn't scare ya'll too much...

In case you guys missed it, I made a [fic mix](#) which will likely continue to grow as the fic does. The incredible [35grams](#) very generously supplied the art! Special thanks to [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#) for his invaluable help as a beta, and to my lovely partner, Will.

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They rode, as always, in silence. Levi let his eyes crawl over the fields, the rivers, the broken-down shacks and abandoned filling stations that made up this area. The only inhabitable houses were on stilts these days, but he wasn’t even sure that those would last long. Seemed to be one hurricane after another these days, the water always encroaching, a little bit at a time, decimating the economy, driving away everyone but the fisherman, backwoods drug makers and prostitutes. The image of the dead boy, crumpled and tossed aside, filled his vision again. He blinked hard, tried not to think, tried to let his mind slip into white static. But then Erwin was speaking.

“You got any kids? Or kids that’re...like your own? Nieces, nephews an’tha like?”

Levi swallowed, cleared his throat, shook his head. “Nah. Used to uh. I use’ta have a couple kids I...looked out for, but. They’re gone now.”

“Oh,” Erwin said, wishing suddenly that he hadn’t asked. It was thinking about the boy, thinking about his mother crying as she identified the body at the morgue that did it. It was everything he could do not to imagine her as Jackie, not to imagine Evie or Stephy on that cold slab, and it was eating at him something fierce. He wondered if Levi felt the same, or if

he was immune to this sort of mortal fear. He didn't seem like a man that had a whole lot going for him, somehow.

"Well go on, now. I know you're a family man." Levi prompted, tapping a cigarette out of his soft pack and lighting it up with a plain beat-to-hell steel zippo. Speaking around the cigarette, he drawled, "What's on your mind, detective?"

"I shouldn'a brought it up. Nevermind. That shit from today was just...fucked up, man. It don't sit right with me."

"It wont never sit right with you, but that ain't your only problem."

Erwin's brow furrowed and he frowned sharply. "Now what's that supposed to mean, exactly?"

"Nothin'," Levi muttered, sucking down his cigarette as if the smoke itself could obscure what he'd said.

"No, not 'nothin,' you have somethin'ta say to me? Because let's be honest, Levi, you haven't said more'n ten words at a time ta me since we got partnered, and I have a hard time thinkin' you know enough about me ta say what my problems are, exactly."

Levi blew twin streams of smoke out of his nose with a sigh. "Lil' touchy fer starters, Smith."

Erwin huffed and kept his eyes on the road. A leaden silence settled heavy between them. Riding around in silence was hardly anything new for them, but before it had been because they simply didn't have anything to say. Now Erwin felt suddenly judged by Levi, and who the hell was he to judge anyway? No kids, not even a family, as far as Erwin could tell, and yet here he was, telling him he had some kind of problem.

"You know what I think?" He didn't wait for Levi to answer, just barreled on, "I think *you're* the one with the problem."

"Smith, you don't know what the fuck you're talkin' 'bout."

"No, I don't, because you never fuckin' talk at all. How the hell 'm I 'sposed to know dick about you when you never fuckin' talk? An' the one time I think I might need'a talk about somethin', you go on tellin' me 'bout my problems. Shit, Levi, after what we saw t'day your gonna tell me I got problems?"

Levi snorted, stubbed out his cigarette in the car's ashtray. "Look, Smith, did it ever occur to you that ya might not wanna know me? That maybe it's better we just keep things... professional? Notta mention your goin' on about me tellin' you ya got problems when ya didn' even bother'ta find out what the fuck I was saying? Christ, Erwin, get your fuckin' pants outta that wad."

Silence dropped between them again, stony, cold. But Erwin wasn't ready to give up yet; there was more to say. "I'm tryin'ta be nice, Levi, I am, but you gotta know folks 'round here don't offer their kindness jus'for kicks. I'm not sayin' we gotta be friends, but you could at



least try to be fuckin'...friendly. I mean for Christ's sake, it's like havin' a stone for a partner. A smart stone, but still."

"Jesus fuck, Smith, didn't realize your feelin's was so hurt."

"Christ, it ain't that...I just. My wife, Jackie? She's insistin' you come on over for a home-cooked meal. I was hopin'ta have at least one...conversation, at least, 'fore I sprung that on ya but. Here we are."

"Sorry, I ain't a great dinner guest. Send my thanks, though."

Erwin snorted, "I could'a guessed an all, but it ain't like that. Jackie isn't takin' no for an answer. You gotta come over."

Levi pursed his lips, his eyes glazing over for a moment. He swallowed, hoping that Erwin would feel his discomfort and take it back, but it didn't work. He just sat there in expectant silence, clearly assuming that Levi would just agree to this ridiculous plan. Sadly, Levi knew that he would, despite the fact that meeting Erwin's family sounded like the worst possible way to spend an evening, especially in light of the case and all the associations that it brought to mind. But Erwin was apparently beholden to his wife; he wasn't budging.

"Fine," Levi muttered. "When?"

"Friday after work," Erwin breathed, visibly relieved.

"I need to bring anythin'?"

"Some wine, maybe..."

"Don't drink."

"Of course you don't. Just. Don't fuckin' worry about it. Just show up 'round seven and I'll be happy."

The conversation dropped again after that and finally, finally Erwin let it rest. Levi just lit up another cigarette and stared out the window for the rest of the trip.

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"Got word back from the morgue." Levi's tone was grim as he leaned back against the desk. Erwin was surprised to find that he was almost as tall as Levi when he was sitting down. He couldn't have been more than five-three or four. Erwin wondered if he'd been malnourished as a child.

"Well, let's have it."

"Cause of death was confirmed as strangulation, bruises were possibly defensive, coulda' also been held down for the rape. Yeah, he was raped 'fore'e' was strangled, perp used some vaseline and a condom, guess 'e didn't wanna leave no evidence. Autopsy confirms no ligature marks, but sumatha' dirt under 'is nails was definitely blood, it's bein' analyzed but

we can't afford no DNA test 'less we can't solve this'n with real police work. Cream confirmed to be the lightenin' stuff, it's a common-type brand."

"Anythin' comin' from the questioning? Local cops, anythin'?"

"Yeah, they like the uncle."

"The uncle? Where'd that come from?"

"Neighbors seen 'im skulkin' 'round the neighborhood. Drives a van, an' 'e done skipped town right about the same time."

"Easy enough, but we need more evidence. We gotta get that uncle brought in."

"I don't like it." Levi leaned against the desk, leaning closer to Erwin, his voice dropping. He smelled like soap and cigarettes, the two scents incongruous and strange. The edges of Erwin's lips pulled down in a slight frown, and he nodded.

"Explain?"

"Why....would the uncle do it here? Why in broad fuckin' daylight, when'e's got easy access'ta' tha boy at home? Why the fuckin' cream? The pieces ain't fittin', an I'm'unna be honest? This is a white neighborhood with a brown problem. Tell me they ain't jus' tryin'a get rid'a this lil' issue, ya know?"

"Why'd 'e leave town, then? Seems pretty suspect..."

"Come the fuck on, Smith," Levi hissed, leaning lower toward his ear, Erwin pulling back a bit on instinct. "It ain't hard'ta believe he figured this'd happen. Anyway, there's another piece'a evidence you ain't heard yet."

"Alright well, out with it then."

"We gotta neighbor claims she saw an ice cream truck parked in that very spot durin' the likely window'a' tha rape."

"What kinda ice cream truck?"

"One'a them white vans, painted-in windows, plays the creepy music? Like that."

Erwin smiled up at Levi, nodded. "You should'a said so in the firs' place, Levi. Let's put out an APB on the van, see what we can find. Start in New Iberia."

Levi nodded and stood, his mouth set in firm line.

"Good work, detective," Erwin said, smiling as he returned to his typewriter. If Levi muttered something about just having his eyes open unlike anyone else in this god forsaken state, Erwin didn't hear it.

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“Mind if I...head out?” Erwin asked, standing up from his desk and cracking his spine a few times. “Jackie wants me to come on out’ta this church thing, you know how it is.”

“Haven’ been ta church since I was a kid, but I doubt ’s much different.”

Erwin laughed, shook his head. “Nah, it ain’t changed much. Nice folks, boring services, everybody tryin’ not’ta curse too much’n pretendin’ not’ta gossip. Same ol’, same ol’. Hey, wanna come? It’s a potluck, but you don’ gotta bring nothin’, really, the women like’ta compete’n’all that.”

Levi stared at him with wide eyes, silent, before finally muttering, “Thanks for the invitation’n’all, Smith, but it don’t sound like my kinda scene.”

Erwin raised his brows and went on, “Well, ya don’ know what yer missin’, but I understand.” Privately, he was terribly amused, but he tried to sound genuine about the whole thing anyway. The thought of Levi at a church function was almost too much. “Well, in that case, I’ll be seein’ ya,” he said, waving over his shoulder as he left. Levi sat at his desk, hands poised above the typewriter a bit dumbfounded. Church? Really? Surely Erwin had been pulling his leg, but it was hard to tell.

Erwin chuckled as he got into his truck, a big black Chevy that Jackie had convinced him to buy last Christmas, and headed out toward the church, the radio playing softly. The APB hadn’t revealed anything, but it was early yet. He rolled down the windows and let the muggy evening air flow through the truck. Autumn was late-coming, as always, summer stretching eternal in the verdant Louisiana deltas. His mind wandered to the case at hand, to Levi’s premature guesswork about the killer. A serial? It wasn’t impossible, but Christ, there hadn’t been a serial in these parts...as long as Erwin could remember, at least. Of course people had their spook stories and hoodoo tales but there hadn’t been an honest-to-god serial anything that Erwin could remember. Then again, Levi wasn’t from around these parts. Maybe he’d let all the folklore get to him.

No, that wasn’t right. Levi wasn’t one to get all wrapped up in the bayou tales, was he? But the more Erwin considered the evidence, the more it seemed like a rush job...a botched first try. Maybe a serial in the making, but this guy was practically a joke. No ligature marks meant he hadn’t even tied his victim up. What had he expected to happen? Or was it...could it be...arrogance? Erwin came to a stop sign and pulled out his little notebook, jotting down the word “PRIDE,” underlining it twice before he shifted the truck into gear and went on down the road. He could bring it up to Levi later.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Trinity Southern Baptist church, his eyes landing on Jackie, who was outside waiting for him. Her wavy brown hair was pulled up into a messy ponytail, her slim, tanned arms crossed over one another, a smile on her face. Erwin parked, stepped out of the truck, and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “How ya doin’, baby?”

“I’m alright, girls’r playin’ on the swings out back, they got the potluck goin’ inside. How’re you, detective?” She wrapped her arm around his waist as they walked inside, pushing open the glass doors.

“Oh, alright, ya’know, gotta big case goin’ on.” He put his arms around her shoulders and smiled as they passed someone he vaguely recognized from the few Sunday services he attended.

“That lil’ boy in New Iberia?”

“Yeah, guess the press’s already on it.”

“Sorry, babe.”

“It’s fine, darlin’, but I can’t be stayin’ long, ya’know? Promised Levi I’d get back’n finish some paperwork’n follow up on a couple’a leads.”

Jackie frowned. “You have to?”

“C’mon now, you know how the job is,” Erwin said with a sigh. “I’ll try not’ta make it home too late, huh?”

“Yeah right,” Jackie said, but the disappointment in her tone was mingled with affection, and she squeezed his waist, so he figured she wasn’t too mad. They made their way down to the church basement, decorated with multi-colored leaves, pumpkins, and scarecrows. “Well, at least say your hellos, then, and make sure ya see your daughters now, ya hear?”

“Wouldn’ dream of anythin’ less,” Erwin replied, kissing the top of her head. He allowed himself one barely audible sigh before he turned, located a face in the crowd, and pulled on a grin. “Hey there, Sam, long time no see! How’s ya’ll’s renovation goin’?”

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Finally, after eating a polite amount of food, making the rounds, listening to the small talk and the gossip with a smile, deflecting questions about the New Iberia murder, hugging his girls, and shaking hands with damn near everyone there, he was free. He had a bit of a drive to make tonight and didn’t want to waste more time than he had to. A few miles outside of town there was a filling station; Erwin stopped, filled his tank and borrowed a restroom key attached to a string of alligator teeth. In the dingy, yellowing bathroom he took a piss and changed into close-fitting jeans and a worn out t-shirt, folding and packing away his button up, slacks, and bolo tie into his black overnight bag. Finally, he pulled on a pair of beat up alligator-leather boots and made his way out of the restroom, dropping off the key and buying a six-pack of Coors on the way out.

He kept the windows rolled down and the radio on until the static obscured the music too much to stand. Where he was going, they didn’t have great radio reception, but they made do. Listening to the radio wasn’t the point, anyway. He’d discovered this place years ago when he was still just a cop; one of the other guys had heard there was a lot of drug activity in this little hollow in the middle of nowhere. When they’d gotten there, everyone had scattered, but based on what he saw, Erwin knew that he would be back. Winding through the country roads, he cracked open a beer and gulped at it while he drove, his gut clenching in a familiar kind of way. He didn’t allow himself too many of these excursions — after all, he wasn’t some kind of sex maniac — maybe that was why he always got so wound up on the drive. He

crushed the beer can and tossed it into a bag on the passenger side before cracking open another.

Half an hour and two beers later, he was pulling his truck over, driving through a slight ditch and parking slightly off of the road. He kept his fingers on the pulse of the police chatter so he knew which days were safe to come out. When the quotas weren't getting met and the chief started bellyaching, Erwin knew to stay clear. This month had been pretty good so far, and with local and state police tied up with the juvenile homicide case, it was as safe as this kind of thing could be. Erwin cleared his throat, checked his teeth in the mirror, stopping to ensure that his blond hair was only slightly mussed. It was pitch dark outside and no one gave a shit, anyway, but the whole thing felt awkward if he looked a mess. He heaved a sigh and stepped out of the truck, the last half of the six pack in hand as he walked down the road under a sea of early autumn stars. The nocturnal chorus of the Louisiana night sang their endless drone, nearly drowning out the soft thud of his boots hitting the packed dirt road.

He opened another beer and strolled along the road, willing away the tightness in his chest as his eyes strained to see what was ahead. About a quarter mile up the way, he saw a stick jammed upright into the mud by the side of the road. He turned right, melting into the woods, the sticks and leaves crunching under his feet. It was a counting game now, fifty strides east, another twenty five north, then turn east again until you reached the hollow. He felt the woods open up around him, his eyes adjusted enough to make out other shadows leaning against trees, some with cigarettes, some flicking lighters to show they had something else with them. Erwin wasn't interested in drugs right now; he had only one aim tonight. He leaned back against a tree, taking a deep breath and crumpling his last beer can before reaching down to palm his cock, to get it stirring.

It didn't take long, but it never did. He thought that his good grooming and form-fitting clothes might have done the trick, but more likely it was just luck of the draw. They were all here for one reason, no one was trying to hide it. He was ready to get sucked, and the smooth hand that grabbed his belonged to the person who was ready to suck him. It was simple. Better, he thought, much better than cheating on Jackie and messing up his family. This was fine. He didn't need much, but every man had needs. At least he'd learned to manage his.

He found himself pushed against a tree, the man who'd grabbed him already working his belt open with shaking hands. "Hold on," he hissed, "I gotta take a piss." The beers had worked their way through him, and he shambled over to another tree, moaning as he relieved himself. Finally, he came back over where the man was standing, his body language edgy, unsure. "What, you fresh meat or sumthin', boy?" he whispered, careful to avoid speaking aloud. "You sure seem mighty anxious."

"No, sir," the other man stammered, and Erwin could tell by his silhouette and his voice that he was fairly young.

"How old'r'ya, boy?" he whispered, the boy's nervousness sending a surge of a thrill through him.

"Seventeen, sir," the boy replied. "As'a September."

*Just this side of legal* Erwin thought, and he grinned in spite of himself. “I’m gonna put on a rubber, son, and then I’m gonna teach you how to suck a man’s cock. Happy fuckin’ birthday.”

“Y...yes sir but...a rubber, sir?”

“Ain’t worth takin’ a chance, son.” Erwin unzipped his pants and pulled his cock out, pulling the boy over by his arm and placing his hand on his cock.

“Jesus...” the boy gasped, fingers traveling down the length.

“Wait’till I get hard,” Erwin said with a smirk. Then the boy was working him, too fast at first, too eager. Erwin slowed him down, guided the trembling hand within his own, and rolled the condom down over himself. “There,” he whispered, pressing on the boy’s shoulder as he sunk down to his knees. “Show me how bad you want my cum.”

“Jesus fuck...” he marveled. Erwin sighed.

“God damnit, kid, shut the fuck up and get busy.”

And he did. To his credit, he was better than Erwin would have expected, testing the head of his cock with his mouth first, then licking all around it. Erwin grasped at the hand that rested on his hip and shoved it on to his cock, groaning as that hand began to pump him while those lips sucked and his tongue swirled. “Good, good boy,” Erwin whispered, his fingers threading into the boy’s shaggy hair. It was surprisingly soft between his fingers, and unbidden, he saw a flash of black hair, pale skin, grey eyes. He put a hand over his mouth to stifle the groan, the flash of pleasure at the mental image followed quickly with a shock of guilt that he was more than happy to push away. He imagined Levi’s lips reduced to a slim line, stretched around his cock, imagined him choking and gagging as he fought to deepthroat, imagined those small hands trembling as they grasped at his hips for some purchase, imagined the little noises Levi would make and the way the vibrations would travel straight to his balls. He groaned louder now, his fingers fisting in the boy’s soft hair as he encouraged him along.

“Ri’ there,” he gasped, “Tongue right there while you suck me, boy. Perfect. *Perfect*.” The boy grunted, moaned, and Erwin shuddered, his mind going straight back to Levi, imagining ripping those stupid ill-fitting suits off of him, grabbing at his wrists until the pale skin began to purple, imagining Levi’s nails biting into his back as he fucked him...”

“I’m gonna come,” he gasped, shoving the boy’s head down hard one last time while he exploded into the condom, shuddering and moaning. It had been too fast, but these things weren’t supposed to last long. In and out before anyone had a chance to miss you...or at least, that was the idea. The boy pulled off with a pop, and Erwin breathed heavily for a moment before pulling off the condom and tossing it into the woods.

“How was I?” the boy asked, breathless, his voice a little scratchier than it had been before.

“Ya did good, boy. Got a cigarette?”

“Sure,” he said, and Erwin heard him digging in his pockets for a moment before a cigarette was held out to him, along with a small Bic lighter. “Thanks,” Erwin said, lighting up and taking a long, slow drag. He handed the lighter back and the boy lit his own cigarette, the two of them smoking in silence. When they were done, the boy muttered, “See ya,” and melted off into the woods.

“Not fuckin’ likely,” Erwin whispered after him, stomping out the cigarette butt and zipping himself up. With a sigh, he ambled back to the road, slipping through the trees and feeling relaxed...empty.

It wasn’t until the long drive home that he remembered the fantasy of Levi and, with a curse, forced it yet again from his mind.

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“I’m goin’ home then, honey, anythin’ I can getcha ‘fore I go?”

“No, but I thank ya, Brenda. You get on home, I’ll be outta here soon,” Levi drawled over his shoulder. He’d discovered after staying late the last few days that Brenda was, in fact, a fucking godsend. She always left him a thermos full of hot coffee and, once she’d realized that he wasn’t eating, she’d began bringing extra sandwiches and apples for him. No one else at the station seemed to care for him too much, but he and Brenda had bonded over a love for cleaning supplies and her peculiar desire to make sure he was fed and caffeinated. Could be all the caffeine that was getting to him now...nah, he knew better than all that. He’d been off-kilter since his last bender, and he wasn’t bouncing back like he used to. Was he paying for his twenties now? He’d always figured that they would catch up with him one way or another, but this was...new. It was useful, but complicated, the sudden sensation of all his neurons firing at once, machine gun cognitions, connections, associations, and meanwhile Erwin was just ambling about looking for an ice cream truck. This was deeper, it was so much deeper, he knew it...it was the fucking cream. Whitening cream. This man had a ritual and it was meaningful, not just your average backyard predator, this man had taken a little Mexican boy and slathered him in whitening cream, hadn’t even bothered to tie him up. Who the fuck knew, maybe Erwin was right and he was jumping to conclusions, but he didn’t think so. He’d read about serials that did things to make their victims “perfect”, to make them suit the killer’s vision. This wasn’t anything new. There was nothing new. Nothing new under the sun.

“Night then, darlin’,” she drawled, waving her hand at him.

“Night, Brenda.”

If he was a serial, there would be something else. Something that linked him to past crimes. There would be past crimes. Missing children. Missing children with Spanish names, perhaps. Well, it was a start. Levi lit a cigarette — smoking at the desk was frowned on during the day, but at night there was no one here to give a damn. He took a long drag and blew the smoke out in a single stream. *Focus, Levi* he said, fingers trembling slightly. He looked up to Erwin’s desk with its family pictures, the typewriter left out, sloppy papers strewn about. It was a wonder he didn’t lose half the evidence with a desk like that...Levi

frowned, blinked, looked again. Yup, he was there, the little boy — Andrew Gutierrez was his name — staring back blankly.

“Why are you here?” Levi hissed, pressing his lips together. He knew that the ghost, the specter wouldn’t talk, not with the purpled stripes on his neck, the blackened eye, the crusted remnants of whitening cream still clinging to his skin. “*Go*, you ain’t even...fuckin’ real...” Yet still the boy stared, eyes empty, mouth slack. He knew that he should be used to this by now, it had been going on for awhile, ever since the last time he overdosed...it was the reason he rarely slept, all the victims he hadn’t been able to save, the murders he hadn’t been able to solve pushing in at the edges of his vision, appearing before him, staring at him...Levi cleared his throat and shook his head, then rubbed his temples. “Ya ain’t real, and I’ve got work to do. *Fuck*.”

Somehow, he managed to focus on his work for the next three hours, carefully going through every missing person’s case over the last decade for persons under the age of eight, then under the age of ten just to be safe. Of the bodies that had been recovered, none of the non-white kids had whitening cream on them, and those who weren’t too decomposed had different patterns of injury. Levi combed through the files again and again, but couldn’t find anything that appeared to be even remotely related to this case. Frustrated, he pulled the last cigarette from his pack, cursing as he caught Andrew again out of the corner of his eye. “Ya ain’t real, ya ain’t real,” he muttered to himself like a mantra. The more he said it, the less convincing it sounded.

Andrew stared at him dumbly, and Levi sighed, gathering up his jacket and the ashtray half-full of cigarette butts. Secretly, he was starting to think they wouldn’t find the man who did this. Their witnesses were unreliable, no one could find the damn ice cream truck, the boy’s family wasn’t any help at all, and Erwin didn’t even seem to care to entertain the idea that this event was not, in fact, isolated. Levi stepped up into his truck, letting his head fall back against the seat with a sigh. His mind spun and spun again, a certain sort of strange vertigo that left his mouth tasting like salt and his throat feeling parched. He wouldn’t be sleeping tonight, again, unless he broke his dry spell. With the thought of whiskey on his mind, he swallowed thickly and turned the key in the ignition. “Ya weren’t ‘is first,” he muttered to himself. “You jes’...weren’t.”

## Chapter End Notes

\*Just in case anyone is wondering, the age of consent in Louisiana is 17.

Next update: Wednesday, July 9th

I am currently finished with Chapter 4, the fic is at around 20,600 words. If I get far enough ahead, I'll post a bit more often. :)



# Countdown

## Chapter Summary

Levi fidgeted, took a bite of egg and chewed thoughtfully. “I’ve jus’ never quite un’nerstood tha reasonin’ behind every Southern man tryin’a pretend he got some deal wi’ God where’n he can do as he pleases long as ‘e come’ta church on Sunday mornin’. Thas’ all.”

“An I s’pose yer above all that.”

“I don’ preten’ta be nothin’ I’m not.”

## Chapter Notes

Yes yes hello! I'm very excited about everything that is happening in this story jkksajd. I hope that you guys enjoy. Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [volpertingersandwhiskey](#). I couldn't do this without you two :3

Enjoy!

“Wake up, Big’n, they found yer ice cream truck.” Erwin started suddenly, looking up to find Mike smiling down at him. He hadn’t realized that he’d dozed off, but when he looked around, Mike seemed to be the only one who’d noticed. Where the fuck was Levi, anyway? Erwin felt a surge of annoyance and frowned. “C’mon now, I’m jus’ tha messenger,” Mike chuckled, then leaned forward slightly.

“Hey, *hey*, can ya go one goddamn day without sniffin’ me? Jesus,” He punched at Mike’s arm, and Mike smirked back at him. “I had a...long night las’ night, and in case ya couldn’ tell, my partner decided not’ta show up fer work today fer reasons I can’t even begin to guess at, so jus’...lay off, will ya?” Then, as the realization dawned on him, he stood up and looked Mike in the eyes, “Did’ya jus’ say they found the fuckin’ ice cream truck?”

“Sure did, but I’m warnin’ ya, it ain’t gonna help much unless yer new partner Sherlock Holmes finds somethin’ the locals can’t.”

“Look, it wouldn’ surprise me or nothin’. Where’s it at?”

“Jus’ over the parish line in Delcambre. Levi’s already there, by the way.”

“The fuck? How’d he know about it ‘fore I did?”

“Couldn’t much tell ya, but I’d get out there if I was you.”

“Gee thanks, wouldn’t a figger’d it out myself, Zackarius. Anyone told’ya yer a bastard lately?” Erwin started gathering up his briefcase and jacket, digging through his pockets for his keys.

“Not often enough, I’m sure of it. Listen, you’n Jacks wanna get a beer this weeken’?”

“Sure, but you know she’ gonna have a friend she’s wantin’ you ta meet, right?”

“I expect nothin’ less. She’s a god damned angel.”

“Sure is. I’ll talk to’er ta’night.”

“Alright. See ya, Smith.”

Erwin waved over his shoulder and trotted outside, mentally cursing Levi for going out to a scene without him. What the hell kind of department had he worked in before that he could just drive out to a crime scene all on his own? They were going to need to have a serious talk about protocol, because this was ridiculous.

Erwin stopped and got a coffee on his way out of town, hoping it would keep him awake as he drove to the new crime scene. The radio squawked, telling him an address and reminding him that Levi was already there. “Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled before he confirmed he was on his way. The ice cream truck had been located in Delcambre, a little fishing town that was known for shrimp and flooding, more or less. It was parked rather conspicuously in the loading area of a used furniture store, so the police had heard about it first thing that morning when the store owner called. Erwin parked on the street and pulled his jacket on as he stepped out of the car. Making his way around the back of the building, he spotted a cop with a sour look on his face, leaning against the brick wall that faced the alley and smoking with a vengeance.

“Guess’n ya met my partner?” Erwin asked, tapping the badge that clipped to his belt loop.

“Tha’ the lil’ one wi’tha creepy eyes an’ tha big ol’ notebook?”

“Sure ‘nuff,” Erwin nodded. “He o’er there now?”

“Far ’s I know,” the cop said, throwing his cigarette down roughly and stomping on it. Erwin wondered what had happened, but knew that he could guess, more or less. Levi had a way of being off-putting, and everything about him screamed, “*Outsider*” to any local that rubbed shoulders with him. Folks around here weren’t too fond of outsiders, especially ones that came across as strange.

“Thank ya,” Erwin nodded and walked forward, ducking under the police tape and making his way toward the van.

“Smith!” An officer waved him over, “They said this guy was yer partner, wha’ happened ta Nile?”

“Departmental changes,” Erwin said with a small smile. “How’s it goin’, Lacroix? Hows that new kid’a’yers?”

“Screamin’ and poopin’, the way they do. I’m sure ya know all about it.”

“Sure’nuff. I see ya met Levi.”

“Sure did.”

“Well, I better get on up there. We gotta catch up o’er a beer or sumthin’ sometime. Get ya’ll a sitter an’ have a night out, huh?”

“Fuck, I wouldn’ complain.”

“We’ll talk later. Good seein’ ya, Lacroix.”

Erwin waved as he turned, pulling latex gloves out of his pocket and slipping them on. He approached the van, an old beat-up thing that didn’t look like it would make it down the street, much less all the way to New Iberia. Even so, here it was, the back double-doors open, Levi’s baggy thrift store trousers the only part of him left unobscured. Erwin was surprised to realize he could recognize him from that alone.

“Mornin’, Erwin,” he drawled as Erwin came around the back of the van, closing his notebook with a snap.

“Mornin’, Levi. Listen, ya can’t jus’ go on ta crime scenes without me, ya hear? We got-...”

“Can we have our lil’ spat later, Smith? I need to tell ya about this van.”

Erwin was frustrated, a white-hot flash going off behind his eyes, but he reigned it in.

“Alrigh’, *fine*, Levi, tell me about the damn van.”

Levi managed to ignore the tone in Erwin’s voice and press straight on to the facts. “There ain’t a damn thing here, Smith. Whole thing’s been scrubbed clean, license plates’r stolen, VIN takes it back to a junkyard over’n Erath, owner’s sayin’ he sold the thing fer cash a decade ago, can’t ‘member who bought it to save ‘is life. Hell, he can’t even remember ownin’ the damn thing. It’s ne’er been registered, ‘n ain’t no one reported it b’fore. Inside’s been bleached and scrubbed, whole thing’s been stripped down, techs can’t find s’much as a fingerprint.”

“So what yer sayin’,” Erwin said slowly with no small amount of disbelief, “Is that fer all this...we got no evidence. Not a fuckin’...shred a’evidence in the whole damn thing?”

“Nah, but see, that *is* the evidence. This’s ‘is contingency plan, righ’ here, and ain’t nobody gonna have a contingency plan if they dunno wha’their doin’, see? He knew where’ta scrub, knew what’ta do, he’s had the damn thing fer a decade. This...wasn’ ‘is plan, per se, but it *was* ‘is jus’-in-case plan.”

“Whole thing’s circumstantial, though,” Erwin said with a frown. “We can’t pin this shit on anyone, ’s too shaky.”

“Yeah, but listen, Smith, ‘e’s a serial. I’ll bet e’s been kidnappin’ kids outta this truck fer years. We need’a look through tha cold cases’n see if we can’t make sum kinda connection, ya see?”

“Like what, if anybody heard an ice cream truck th’day they foun’ their kid missin’? I’m fuckin’ sure. You know how many’a these god-forsaken things they got ‘round here? At leas’ nine months-a the damn year these things’r fartin’ down tha street. How’re we gonna know this’n from everythin’ else?”

“I ain’t saying it’s’n end, Smith, but it’s a start. An’ ‘e’s a serial. You can’t deny that, not in light’a this.”

“Maybe not, I dunno, Levi, seems shaky at best. Ya think Pixis’ gonna bite on this? I’m gonna be real honest, here; I think ya got sumthin’, but I don’t think its got any teeth, ya hear?”

“It’s got teeth alright, we jus’ gotta find ‘em.”

Erwin opened his mouth to argue, but he caught Levi’s gaze in that moment, and the words died in his throat. Those gray eyes were haunted, red-rimmed, desperate in a way he hadn’t seen before or expected. It was the first time he’d really paid attention to the shadows beneath Levi’s eyes, to the hollows of his cheeks, to the paleness of his lips and the little teeth-marks he’d worried into them.

“Alright, alright, relax, buddy...I’ll do what I can wi’the Sergeant, just take a fuckin’ chill pill, alright? Jesus Christ.”

Levi took a deep breath and nodded.

“You gotta learn’ta separate yer’self from the case, man, ya can’t just let it get to ya like this.”

“I know, I know. I’m fine, Erwin, I jus’ gotta do s’more diggin’, see if I can find anythin’ on this guy.”

Erwin frowned. “Yeah, alrigh’, but listen, you got anythin’ ta eat today? ‘Cause you look like you ain’t slept in a week an’ I’ll be honest, them bargain-bin pants’a’yers look ‘bout ready ta fall straight off.”

Levi snorted, the closest thing Erwin had ever seen to a laugh from him, and shook his head, scrubbing his hand over his mouth. “Never pegged ya fer the motherin’ type, Smith.”

“Hey now,” Erwin said, affecting a warning tone though his lips curled up in a half-smile. “’S gonna’ be hard ‘nough jus’ convincin’ the Sarge ta let us explore this crazy angle withou’ you lookin’ like death warmed over, ya hear?”

“I get it, Jesus. We’ll get us some coffee an’ breakfas’ ‘fore we head on back, will that shut ya up?”

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Delcambre was a small town, so as far as diners went, the choices were limited. Levi picked the first place they ran across that didn't look too run down, and ten minutes later they were seated in a booth with an ice water and coffee apiece, waiting on their food. The diner was small but clean, the staff consisting of a single waitress and a line cook. Erwin watched as Levi stirred a rather astonishing amount of sugar into his coffee and flipped through his notebook. Only then did he remember scribbling into his notepad the night before.

"Hey, listen, there is one thing I though'bout, ya' know?"

"Wha's that?" Levi drawled, distracted.

"Well, I was thinkin' 'bout your crazy theory, an' I thought...no ligature marks, right? That coul'be inexperience, the way I see it, but it could jus' be...pride."

"Pride?" Levi asked, his eyes finding Erwin's and narrowing slightly.

"Don' get all creepy on me, now, I'm jus' sayin' if ya don' tie up yer victim, it's either 'cuz yer a fuckin' idiot, or it's 'cuz you think yer too good'ta need'ta tie 'em. Like either they ain't gonna run, or if'n they did, wouldn' make much of a difference, ya see?"

Levi was still staring at him, and Erwin sat back, extending his arms over the back of the booth. "Now, see, you ain't the only one can make a theory. Whaddya say?"

"I'd say'ets possible."

"Not any more far fetched'n yer whole serial idea, though."

"Nah, an' it might mean we got somethin' of a lead. If ee's done this before say five, ten times, maybe he's thinkin' he don't need no ropes'r cuffs'r nothin'. But if ee's been successful all them times, could be real hard'ta figure out which cases'r his."

"Well, ya wanted'ta dig more'n here's yer chance. So we start wi' kidnappins in the area?"

"Already looked las' night, but we can look again."

"Las' night? Really?"

The waitress brought their food, then, setting down a plate of pancakes and a bottle of syrup before Erwin along with another plate with a fluffy pile of scrambled eggs, two strips of bacon, two sausage patties, and a mess of hash browns. For Levi, she brought two eggs over easy and an English muffin. "Can I get some ketchup'n hot sauce too, darlin'?" Erwin asked with a winsome smile. "O'course ya can, detective!" the waitress replied, cheeks flushing faintly. Levi rolled his eyes.

"You know that ain't hardly a meal, right?" Erwin asked, eyeing Levi's plate.

"I don' know if ya noticed'r not, Smith, but ya got about eighty pounds on me. If I ate like ya'll do I wouldn' fit through tha door."

“Ya always eat li’that? ’S’that why ya look so sickly? I figured you jus’ didn’ have a woman ta cook fer ya.”

“I couldn’ half tell ya. Can we get back’ta’the case now please, *detective*?”

“Who’s tha touchy one now, huh?” Erwin smirked, drowning his pancakes in syrup.

Levi made a frustrated little *Tch* noise and stabbed at his eggs until they bled their orangey yolks all over his plate. “Anyway, I took a look at all them records las’ night. Checked the missin’ persons under ten years old an’ I didn’ fin’ jack shit.”

“Wi’this new angle though,” Erwin spoke around a mouthful of pancakes, “Ya think ya migh’ be able’ta look again with uh...fresh eyes? I’ll help ya, don’ worry. Ya don’ gotta run off doin’ everythin’ yerself, ya know.”

“Yeah well, somebody had ta go ta church on a *Wednesday*.”

Erwin shrugged. “Gotta keep tha missus happy.”

“Is that why?” Levi raised a brow slightly.

“Why else?”

“Nothin’.”

“No really, what’r’ya tryin’ ta say?”

Levi fidgeted, took a bite of egg and chewed thoughtfully. “I’ve jus’ never quite un’nerstood tha reasonin’ behind every Southern man tryin’a pretend he got some deal wi’ God where’n he can do as he pleases long as ‘e come’ta church on Sunday mornin’. Thas’ all.”

“An I s’pose yer above all that.”

“I don’ preten’ta be nothin’ I’m not.”

“Good fer you. We gon’ talk about this case’r’not?”

“Ain’t much else ta talk’bout, ‘till we got ourselves some files.”

“Fine. I’ll get the files sent over from local departments so’s we can make sure we ain’t missing nothin’.”

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“Taxman’s got’ya lookin’ through files nonstop, huh Smith? Ya ever gonna come out wi’us again, or is yer new friend more excitin’.”

“Please, Dawk, you know ya like it better when I ain’t around.”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t ya?” Ness smirked. “He pouts like a lil’ girl when you ain’t there, Smith. Misses’is boyfriend.”

Nile frowned, but Erwin and Ness just laughed. “Don’ pout now, Dawk, I miss you too,” Erwin drawled, winking at Nile.

“You’re such a fuckin’ freak. Both’a you, come’ta think of it. They had’ta reassign ya to tha Taxman ‘cuz’e’s the only one can ‘alf stand ya.

“’S real cute how much ya care, Dawk,” Erwin chuckled as Nile threw a pen at his head and Nanaba pushed through the door into the break room, Mike in tow.

“You boys havin’ yerselves a pissin’ contest in here again?”

“Not without you, Nana,” Erwin shot back with a grin.

“She’d kick ya’lls asses anyhow,” Mike added, pulling a Coke out of the fridge. “You shoulda’ seen the way she took ou’ them tweakers yesterday.”

“I been takin’ classes,” Nana replied, punching the air with enthusiasm.

“C’mon, Nana, hit me in the stomach,” Nile said, standing up and flexing his abs.

“C’mon now, Dawk, don’ be stupid,” Ness warned, but a moment later Nana was laughing and flexing her arms and Nile was doubled over, holding up a hand and shaking his head.

Eventually, the hooting and laughter calmed down, and everyone more or less tucked into their lunches. After being buried in case after case of child abduction, solved and unsolved, for the better part of two days, Erwin welcomed the horsing around. Sometimes, in this line of work, you needed something to make yourself feel human again. Privately he wondered what Levi had to make himself feel human in all of this.

“I heard Jacks invited tha Taxman over fer dinner,” Ness offered, raising a brow.

“Really?” Nile half-gasped, “Didn’ya tell’er ‘e was a weirdo?”

“It’s Jacks, ya’ll, which one’a ya’ll ain’t been over ta Smith’s house at Jacks’ invitation, huh?” Mike said, shaking his head. “Like she gon’ give half a damn abou’ ‘weird’, she’s a good woman. Right, Smith?”

“Better’n’ya’ll ever thought about bein’. I know Levi’s weird but ‘e’s smart’n’e does ‘is work. So lay off, will ya?”

Nile sneered. “Fine, but Marie’s been talkin’ ‘bout invitin’ ya’ll over again, some kinda Halloween thing fer the kids.”

The lot of them began to discuss haunted house plans and whether or not it would be too scary for the little ones while Erwin let his mind wander. They weren’t getting anywhere with all of this, and he wasn’t sure that they ever would...not unless another kid went missing. If Levi’s theory was right, and the killer was a serial who had botched this one, then only God knew what had happened to those other children, and what might have happened if he hadn’t murdered Andrew Gutierrez. Pixis was already on his ass about chasing shadows, and he had to admit, they didn’t have more than shaky evidence and a few personal hunches. Levi had

been spouting all kinds of shit that sounded like it came from some True Crime book and, though Erwin had to admit that the theories were intriguing, he couldn't see proving them. Not without something more, some further evidence. Levi was completely dead-set, but Erwin wasn't as sure, and he knew that they were running out of time before this was handed off to some other department and they were moved on elsewhere. Whitening cream wasn't enough to keep State Police on the case, and there was already talk of the locals just being lazy and not wanting to solve the thing themselves, or have another cold case taking up space in their shelves. Hell, they might just arrest the uncle so that they had someone to prosecute. It wouldn't be the first time.

Erwin shook himself from his thoughts when Mike asked a question about what weekend this Halloween party should go down. Erwin deferred to Jackie, clapped some shoulders and made his way back to his desk. If they didn't find some supporting evidence soon, this was all going to be for nothing...and something told him Levi wasn't going to take to that well.

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"Look, I gotta be honest,"

"No." Levi's statement was final and cold, distracted.

"Levi, ya can't jus' keep drivin' yerself mad lookin' through these damn files."

"You migh' be surprised, Smith."

"Nah, look. Pixis' gonna yank this case if we ain't got nothin' by tha time 'e leaves t'night."

Levi looked up, his grey eyes wide. "He said that to ya?"

"Sure did, jus' now."

"Well, that jus' means I got what...three hours ta go ahead'n find what I need to."

"Listen, Levi, yer comin' over fer dinner tonight an' maybe it'd be better if we jus' wrapped this up. We been through these records damn near a hun'nerd times now, and we ain't gonna find nothin' else."

"I'm sorry, Smith, you can start on tha' paperwork if ya wanna, bu' I got ta keep tryin'."

"I don't suppose there's any reasonin' with'ya at this point?"

"Nah."

Erwin shrugged, sat down, and scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair. Then he set about combing back through the files yet again. An hour passed. He tried to rouse Levi into conversation, but to no avail. Another hour. Levi's jaw was tight, his eyes focused so intently on the papers before him that he looked like he could practically collapse into them. Erwin began doing paperwork, punching the keys of his typewriter furiously, hoping that signing off on the case wouldn't be necessary, but knowing that was foolish. Finally Pixis emerged from his office, stretched, and walked over to their desks. Levi was hunched so



close to the pictures of the children's corpses that he looked nearly asleep. Pixis stared at him for a minute, then looked to Erwin. "Ya'll'r off tha case. Turn in yer findin's and paperwork and get on outta here."

"Uh...yessir." Erwin said, tossing a look at Levi, who was staring at Pixis with something bordering on murderous intent. Pixis caught Levi's expression, but didn't comment on it; he just turned and walked away. It was the wiser choice, Erwin thought, considering Levi's red-rimmed eyes, his hollow cheeks, the way his knuckles had gone white from clenching his fists up. Erwin swallowed and nodded. "Alrigh', then, well, don' worry 'bout'ha paperwork, Levi, I can-..."

But Levi had stood up, his body trembling slightly. Erwin saw his eyes focusing next to the desk, like he was staring at something intently, but there wasn't anything there.

"Hey, hoss...look, ya need'ta take a deep breath. Go smoke'r somethin', c'mon."

Levi's stormy eyes flicked up and locked on his, and he opened his mouth, closed it, his features contorting slightly for just a moment and a pit of dread began to form in Erwin's gut. "Levi...?" he said, his tone half conciliatory, half warning, "'m serious now. Take. A. Breath."

And just like that, Levi's features settled into a careful, blank mask, his shaking stopped, and he nodded. With a rough movement, he grabbed his jacket, muttered, "See ya' at seven, Smith," and stormed out of the station. Erwin felt like he hadn't breathed properly in all his life until that moment, his heart pounding. When he looked up, everyone in the station was staring at him. "Don't ya'll got shit'ta'get done?" Erwin spat out, his fingers clenching into a fist.

"'S Friday night, Smith, so nah, we don' got much ta'do 'sides watch you tryin'a keep control'a yer partner." Nile shot back, his usual smirk wiped away by something between fear and concern. "Ya sure that'n ain't gonna come back'n pull some shit? Yer sure ya wan'that guy 'round yer children?"

"You mind yer own family, Dawk, 'n I'll mind mine, how 'bout that?" Erwin scoffed at him and shook his head. "Jesus Christ, like ya'll ain't never been worked up by a case? Shee-it. Lay the fuck off 'em, will ya?"

Nile opened his mouth but Mike clapped him on his shoulder, hard, and said, "C'mon, ya'll, let's get'tus some beers, huh?"

"I'm parched," Nana broke in, "How'bout ya'll, Ness?"

"Dyin'," Ness confirmed, grabbing up his jacket.

"Firs' round's on me, alrigh'?" Mike began herding everyone toward the door, but he turned around to toss a meaningful look at Erwin, who nodded and rolled his eyes. He wasn't going to cause trouble, but Dawk needed to learn to keep his damn mouth shut. Levi may have been unstable, but he was smart, and frankly, this force needed smart more than anyone was willing to admit. They always worked cases more or less the same way, and it wasn't a bad

thing; their success rate wasn't any worse than anyone else's. But Levi...Levi wanted to go deeper, wanted to get to the bottom of things, and Erwin felt like that was precisely what this place needed. Smart didn't come without its problems, and a man like Levi, someone who was more or less a drifter — no family, far away from his hometown — was as unstable as they came. Nevertheless, Erwin felt as though he were finally waking from a long nap. They didn't catch this guy, not this time...but maybe next time.

Maybe next time.

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Levi couldn't stop shaking. He smoked and smoked and smoked, but it wasn't working, Andrew was everywhere, staring, *staring*, as if he were waiting, and Levi knew that he would always be waiting, just like the others. He'd garnered a new ghost for his collection, a new specter to keep him up at night, a new vision to haunt him. He drew a shaking breath and put his head down on his steering wheel, hoping against hope that the vision of Andrew would leave him alone when he closed his eyes. It wasn't working. He thought about making a phone call, one phone call to make this go away but no...no, he was going to Erwin's house tonight, he was meeting Erwin's family, his lovely, beautiful, normal family, and Levi didn't want to fuck it up, didn't want to seem ungrateful. After all, how often was he invited to anyone's house these days? Erwin was a liar but Levi still felt strangely...well, he'd stood up for him, hadn't he? And he'd held Pixie off as long as he could. He was a Golden Southern Good Ol' Boy but...he wasn't all bad. The concept was new to Levi.

Anyway, he didn't want to fuck this up but how the hell could he avoid it? He was shaking, his eyes swollen with tears that weren't escaping, his breaths coming in hiccups and gasps. He needed something. Maybe he couldn't get what he really wanted, what he *needed*, but he could get something. Something just to take the edge off.

It was that thought that landed him in a pharmacy buying a bottle of cough syrup and a water. He coughed and sniffled to make it look like his disheveled appearance was attributable only to a cold, nothing more, and was in and out of the store within minutes. In the dark confines of his truck he sucked down half the bottle in one go, cursing himself for the flavor, wondering why his dumb ass thought this was any better than fifth of something strong. Bile burbled up the back of his throat, burning, making him curse and he threw the water back into his mouth, trying to swallow away the flavor.

Cough syrup was nasty shit.

He closed his eyes and gradually, gradually his shaking stopped. He breathed slowly, in and out, his body relaxing into the familiar arms of chemical intervention as he sat under the amber lights of a grocery store parking lot. After some time, he wasn't sure how much, he realized that he should probably get his ass over to Erwin's place. He didn't want to be late, but it was already nearly seven. He felt strange, not bringing wine, so he wandered into the grocery and found a bouquet of flowers. Were flowers appropriate? He wasn't sure. Going to a family dinner brought back memories, memories of a family that never was and the one that formed ever so tentatively for a night or two in the Arkansas wilderness. Before the storm. Before he died, for all intents and purposes, and was reborn here in the great green shitheap

they called Delta Country. Levi felt queasy, buying the flowers as fast as he could and driving across town with the streetlights blinking, swirling, curling around him like so many arms.

He was a fucking idiot for not drinking.

Swallowing, scrubbing at his mouth with the back of his hand, Levi opened his truck door and slid out, dropping gracelessly to the ground. He double-checked the address and dragged his feet through the lawn, dreading knocking at the door, dreading more that it would be answered.

Inside, Erwin was crashing about the living room on all fours, pretending to be a dragon while Stephy rode around on his back and Evey attempted to slay him with a foam sword. The doorbell chimed, and immediately the girls were squealing and tearing about, excited to meet the new partner in the way only children could be. “Girls! GIRLS! Hold on, now, let daddy get it, c’mon,” He wasn’t particularly looking forward to this, but his knees were killing, so he was at least glad to be getting off dragon-duty. He opened the door, a grin on his lips, but his greetings died in his throat as his eyes landed on Levi. His skin was ghostly white, eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, his lips faintly colored, cheeks hollow...he looked like death warmed over. Maybe not even warmed over, maybe just thawed out.

“Wow, buddy! You got a cold?” He exclaimed, trying to make sure that the girls didn’t realize what was wrong.

“Uh...yeah, yup,” Levi muttered, his eyes going somewhat wide at the sight of Erwin’s children.

“Oh man. Evey, Stephy, why’don’cha girls go on’n see whatcha can do’ta help yer momma, yeah? I’m gonna help Mr. Levi get some medicine, okay?” The girls, quieted by the unexpected appearance of Levi, nodded and ran back down the hallway toward the kitchen.

“What a beautiful house’n kids,” Levi said in a eerily flat tone.

Erwin wasn’t having any of it.

“Wha’ the hell is wrong with you, Levi, wha’th’fuck’r you on? Showin’ up high as a god damn kite ta eat dinner wi’my family. Those are my *kids*, man,” He was going to continue, but Levi looked so lost, holding his flowers and blinking like a maniac. Erwin sighed, buried his face in his palm, and put an arm around Levi’s small shoulders.

“C’mere, c’mere. Lemme’ take ya to tha back porch, let’s getcha a cigarette’n’you can sober up. Wan’ me ta ask Jacks fer some coffee?”

“Tha’be great,” Levi breathed, visibly relieved.

Erwin managed to guide him to the porch, get back inside and get some coffee brewing before explaining the situation to Jackie who, as he might have predicted, seemed more concerned than upset.

“Do’ya s’pose it was the case?” She asked, brow furrowed.

“Maybe, Jacks, I don’t know. I gotta admit’t’ya, I don’ know him all too well. I know this case done really plucked tha’ boy’s strings, but I can’t half tell ya wha’s gotten inta’him ta’night. I jus’ don’ know.”

“Here,” she said, pressing a mug of coffee into his hands. “Take this’n see if ya can get it outta him. Dinner’ll be ready in a few, but take yer time, ‘kay?”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, stirring a ridiculous amount of sugar into the mug. “Now maybe ya’know why I wasn’ too keen on invitin’ him over.”

“Nonsense. We don’ turn folks away jus’ ‘cuz they’re havin’ it rough. ’S that what ya wan’ yer daughters learnin’?”

“Is *that*?” Erwin asked with a meaningful look toward the door.

“Go, Erwin.”

With a sigh, Erwin went, carefully carrying the coffee mug before him. By the time he got to the porch, Levi was leaning against the rails, staring up at the moon, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Erwin slid the glass door shut behind him, sauntered over, and leaned next to him.

“Mind if I bum from’ya?” he asked, setting the coffee down on the railing next to Levi.

“Nah,” Levi rasped out, tapping a cigarette from his soft pack and handing it over with a book of matches. Erwin struck a match and lit the cigarette, the two of them smoking away in silence. Finally, when his cigarette was nearly finished, Levi said, “Why is it ya do this, Smith?”

“This job?” Erwin asked, though he knew that was precisely what Levi was referring to. “Well. I s’pose it’s ‘cuz I always fig’gerd I woul’ rather help peopl’n’hurt ‘em.”

“And if ya didn’ help ‘em, you’d be tha’ one hurtin’ ‘em?”

“Now, I didn’ say that, quite.”

“Nah, but ya meant it anyhow.”

Erwin sighed. “Why you doin’ it then?”

“I dunno. Not really. Not anymore. Use’ta be ‘cuz I was lookin’ fer redemption. Now I fig’ger it’s b’cuz I don’ believe redemption exists.”

“Ya know mos’ men, when their lookin’ fer redemption, they go on down’ta the church.”

“S’that where you go?” Levi scoffed, and Erwin could hear the sarcasm in his voice. His gut tightened, his mouth went dry as images from the other night crept into his mind. Levi didn’t know...he couldn’t possibly.

“Course it is,” Erwin said, sucking down the last drag of his cigarette. “Sometimes you gotta tell this shit’ta God. Thas’ why them Catholics have confession’n’all...so’s ta get this shit

offa their chests. But I can't imagine tellin' a priest about the shit I see. 'S better jus'ta tell tha Lord I guess."

"Ya really believe that shit?" Levi asked, incredulity creeping into his tone. "Nah, ya can't... really? Pie in tha sky, ol' man with a beard, judgin' from the clouds? Ya really believe in it?"

"Don't you?" Erwin asked, shifting uncomfortably as he tossed his cigarette into the back yard.

"No," Levi said slowly, as if he were talking to an idiot, "I sure as hell do not."

"Wha'd'ya believe in, then? Ya gotta believe in somethin'..."

"Do I?" Levi shot back, his tone pointed and sharp as daggers.

"Well...yeah," Erwin replied, feeling strange, cornered. "Doesn' everybody?"

"Fine then, Ewin. I believe in my power ta fail an' God's ability ta fuck off whenever he fuckin' feels like it'n still get tha credit for the hard work'a man. An' evidence would suggest my beliefs'r more solid'n yers'll ever be."

Erwin wasn't sure how to respond to that, so instead he slipped the cigarettes from where they sat in Levi's front pocket and lit up another. Finally, after puffing on it for a moment while Levi lit another of his own, he said, "Well, I imagine yer entitled ta feel that'a'way, 'specially considerin' our line'a work. But jus'....try not'ta blaspheme 'round the kids, yeah?"

"Obviously," Levi muttered darkly. Erwin left it alone, and they both smoked in silence yet again.

When their cigarettes were burning low, Erwin finally turned to Levi and said, "Ya ready'ta come on in then?"

"I reckon I am," Levi said, draining the last of his coffee. Erwin hadn't even noticed he'd been drinking it; he'd been too caught up in his own thoughts.

"Well then....after you."

# And The Clouds Roll In

## Chapter Summary

“What in the hell?” Erwin asked, cocking a brow.

“I’m gonna be honest, Smith,” Levi muttered softly, his eyes fixing Erwin’s in a grim stare. “We got ourselves a live one.”

## Chapter Notes

You know that feeling right before a storm hits? Electricity in the air, the metallic smells of lightening, the rumbling threat of thunder...

Anyway, enjoy ;)

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Two and a Half Months Later.*

“Coffee,” Erwin said, setting the styrofoam cup down on Levi’s desk, “An’ a bagel wi’ cream cheese.”

“Thank ya,” Levi muttered in his quiet way, pecking away at his typewriter. “I ‘preciate yer dedication to keepin’ meat on ma’ bones.”

“Jacks’d kill me if I didn’. Sometimes I worry she likes ya better’n she likes me.”

“Nah, its jus’ ya’ve proven you can take care’a’yerself. She don’ hafta worry’s’much.”

“Guess so.” Erwin waved at Mike, who was leaning against the desk next to Nanaba while they talked shop with Ness, Dawk and a few others. Erwin realized he hadn’t brought donuts in nearly a week.

“Pixis said ‘e wants’ta see us, by tha way...when ya got here.” Levi said around a mouth of bagel. “Though’ta be honest, I’d rather wait ‘till I finish mah breakfast.”

“Know what its’bout?” Erwin asked, blowing on his own cup of coffee.

“New case, I’m thinkin’,” Levi responded, twisting off a piece of bagel. They’d been working on small stuff the last few weeks. Domestic shit, tweakers, that kind of thing. All in all, it had been rather quiet; a dramatic shift after the Gutierrez boy. It was obvious that Levi was quietly keeping tabs on every missing person’s case in Louisiana these days. He was smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it, so Erwin let it slide. Levi seemed a man of private obsessions— Erwin preferred not to get involved.

“Well, I fig’ger we oughta talk to ‘em, then. Maybe ya’ll can be bothered’ta eat yer bagel in tha car, huh?”

Levi sighed and shrugged. “I’ll jus’ take it with me.”

A moment later they were sitting in front of Pixis, Levi chewing on his bagel and Erwin sipping at a coffee.

“It gladdens mah heart ta see ya’ll gettin’ ‘long,” Pixis said with a smile. Erwin looked at Levi and shrugged, Levi did the same. “I’m gonna be honest, boys, I gotta call this mornin’ from locals down in ol’ Erath. They got somethin’ fer ya. I ain’t got many details but... I’mma be honest, it ain’t pretty.”

Erwin and Levi both nodded, Erwin sitting up a little straighter.

“Now, Erwin, yer a senior detective’n’all, an’ Levi...yer...particular experience uniquely qualifies you ta work with strange cases but. If I see either of ya’ll gettin’ too worked up, goin’ Maverick’er whatever, I ain’t gonna leave ya on the case, ya hear?”

“This a high-profile vic?” Erwin asked, brows furrowed.

“Nah but...the circumstances of the killin’ are...well, honestly, it’s pretty fucked up shit. It’s gonna attract some serious attention. Press’ll be on it in a half a tick so ya’ll better get goin’.”

The two detectives stood and made to leave. As they walked out the door, Pixis added,

“An’ Levi? Nex’ time, eat yer damn breakfast in tha car.”

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“We haven’ touched that body,” the sheriff informed Erwin quietly. “Haven’t got an ID neither. Called you guys firs’, but we’re working on it.” There must have been something about being in a church that made people feel the need to speak softly, even a church that had been desecrated this way. “She’s all yers.”

The sheriff stopped, clearly unwilling to walk further into the scene, but Levi continued on, slipping on his latex gloves and dodging the evidence markers on the ground. The church was small, a backwoods affair with dingy old stained glass windows, yellowing hymnals and wooden pews with brownish cushions that might once have been red. It was dim, even with all of the lights turned on. There were, in fact, only two items in the building that looked at all impressive or well cared-for; a gruesome crucifix that hung on the back wall, the whole of

it at least six feet tall, with Jesus himself, mouth slack, body broken in bronze relief, and a dark cherrywood alter with a white marble top.

It was on this alter that the body rested.

Levi pulled out his notebook first, notating every detail that he could. The victim was female, looked to be in her twenties, though it was hard to tell any more than that. She had a curtain of red hair spread around her head like a fiery halo, her eyes closed neatly, her mouth shut, though blood had dripped and crusted at the edge of it. She had been posed, naked, her legs open, her arms above her head. Slick blood emanated from between her legs. Strips of dirty fabric bound her hands above her head, hiding the ligature marks on her wrists. Her skin, which seemed like it had always been pale and freckled, was covered in bruises, her ribs partially caved in.

“We gotta cause’a death?” Levi called back to the sheriff.

“Hemorrhage, mos’ likely. Need’n autopsy ta’ confirm.”

Levi noted the stab wounds in her thighs and belly, peering a little closer and finding the unmistakable thin white c-section scar across her gut. Her lips were cracked, and Levi separated them carefully with a probe. Her teeth were bad, yellowed and one missing. He checked her nails, noting the crimson around the cuticle. Erwin came up behind him and grimaced.

“She’s had a kid,” Levi said, “C-section scar. She’ll have a record at some hospital, maybe one ‘round here. We need’ta get’er ID’d soon as we can.”

“Post-mortem stab wounds?” Erwin asked, peering at her belly.

“Lookit’ the placement. Lookit’ ‘er teeth. I think she’s a workin’ girl.”

“An’ the killer didn’ like that any?”

“I don’ s’pose so. Well, that’r she was jus’ an easy target.”

“Beaten to death?”

“Looks so. But that blood down ‘tween ‘er legs ain’t hers.”

“How’d’ya know?”

“It’s too fresh...see tha blood on ‘er face? She was dead ‘fore she ever got here. Maybe even cleaned up a bit. Tha’ blood on tha alter has a splash pattern on ‘er thighs, an’ it’s pretty damn fresh.”

Erwin nodded and hummed, impressed.

Levi moved up, examining her arms with gloved hands, lifting them, looking at every surface. He took a moment to scribble in his notebook, then added, “We got potential defense wounds, she was tied up fer ‘while for she died, but maybe when she was snatched ‘er



somethin'." He tucked his pencil away in his pocket and moved on to her hands, realizing for the first time that something was contained between them. "She got somethin' here, Erwin."

"You already done photographed this scene, haven't ya?" Erwin called back to the sheriff.

"Sure'nuff." he confirmed. That was all the encouragement Levi needed; he untied the knot and used the probe to open the hands until something small and grey fell from them. "The hell..." he muttered, stooping down and picking it up. It was a small clay figure of a man, the whole of it fashioned rather crudely, with a bland, smiling expression on his face and a tremendously detailed set of oversized genitalia. Levi swallowed, grimaced.

"What in the hell?" Erwin asked, cocking a brow.

"I'm gonna be honest, Smith," Levi muttered softly, his eyes fixing Erwin's in a grim stare. "We got ourselves a live one."

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The evidence was substantial. There were fingerprints, fibers, hairs, tissue and blood under the nails, footprints, more or less everything they could have asked for aside from a photo of the perpetrator. They called in techs from two different departments to help sort through it all. Levi and Erwin sat in the pews, Erwin watching the techs as Levi stared at the clay figure, now contained in a plastic evidence bag.

"I just...can't get over 'tha fact 'is face is so..."

"Blissful?" Erwin offered, his eyes glued to the body.

"Dumb. Blissful, an....familiar, somehow? You ever seen a thing like this? I mean, anywhere?"

"Not 'as far's I can recall..."

"It seems so...fuck. I've seen it 'fore but I can't place it fer 'tha life'a'me.

"If ya seen it b'fore," Erwin replied, "You'll fig'ger it out. I find that....junk ta be the mos' disturbin', ta be honest. "

"It's in line wi'the rest'a'tha scene. We got some seriously psychosexual drama goin' on here."

"Smith!" a voice called from behind them, "I got somethin' ya'll need'ta see. Also, preacher's on 'is way to talk to ya'll."

They rose from the pews and made their way back toward the deputy who'd called them over. He led them out to the front lawn of the church as he said, "I wen' over'ta the woods fer a piss an' found' this. I dunno if it's got anythin'ta do wi'tha scene but...it don't look like the work'a'no animal, ya ask me."

At his beckoning, Erwin found himself staring down at the carcass of a brown rabbit, it's throat cut cleanly and it's neck clearly broken. Levi flinched at the sight, and Erwin wondered briefly how he could handle the horrors inside that sanctuary, but not this.

"Tha blood on tha alter..." Levi mumbled.

"Good find, deputy," Erwin told the man with a nod. "Get this photographed and catalogued as evidence."

"Why...why use animal blood on'tha alter, Erwin?" Levi asked, tilting his head.

"Ya gotta theory, or ya wantin' my opinion..."

"Well, I know wha'tha press'll say."

"Some kinda Satanic ritual or somethin', I'm guessin'."

Levi nodded.

"But yer not buyin' it?"

"Nah, well. It's like the clay man, ya see? An accessory. Somethin' to contribute'ta'tha overall...ambience a'tha scene."

"Wha' if it isn', though? Wha' if it is...symbolic?" Erwin held up his hand as Levi gave him a withering look. "Now, c'mon. I ain't sayin' it's cultish 'er whatever, but what if it's...somethin' else? Personal, like?"

"Gentlemen, preacher's here," another officer called over. Levi had been opening his mouth to reply, but he snapped it shut and turned just in time to see a tall, attractive man step out of late-model Lexus. His brow arched slightly at the sight. He was wearing a well-tailored shirt, dark slacks and attractive leather shoes. Levi spotted a flash of something gold at his wrist, and made a mental note to check for the brand of his watch. He looked distressed, his salt-and-pepper hair mussed despite his expensive clothing. His light eyes were set off by the bags beneath them, mouth set in a thin line, skin pale.

"Pastor Nichols, this' Senior Detective Smith an' 'is partner, Detective Levi. They gonna ask ya'll a coupl'a questions bu' we don' mean'ta keep'ya long, sir."

"Of course," he said softly. His accent, Levi noticed immediately, was far more neutral than any other he'd heard so far. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but...who will be responsible for cleaning the church?"

"Well, I reckon we'll be takin' the evidence throughou'tha day. Honestly it'll take a coupla' days, then the rest'll be up'ta ya'll."

"I see," he said, a grimace on his lips. "Alright. Please. I'll answer your questions, but may I take a look inside first?"

“Beg yer pardon, sir, but I think it’ll be better if’n ya jus’ answer a coupl’a questions firs’, an anyway we can’ let you in there ‘till the evidence is processed.”

“Ah, I see,” Pastor Nichols was visibly disappointed, but nodded anyway.

“Listen,” Levi said, stepping over so that he was standing next to the pastor, staring ahead at the church along with him, instead of looking at him. Erwin had noticed that Levi had an interesting way with people...he was unsociable and hardly likable by most standards in his personal life, but with suspects and witnesses, he had a strange, quiet sort of way of getting precisely what he needed from them. “You got anybody been comin’ ta’ services lately who seem a little...odd? Off? Or overly interested?”

Nichols was quiet for a moment, thinking. Levi didn’t press him, just waited. “Well... no, detective, I can’t say that I have noticed such a person.”

“Please, Pastor, call me Levi. I know yer parishioners’r like children to ya, you’d notice if’n one was ailin’, but ‘as there been any kin’ of new people at all?”

“I’ll be honest, Levi, we have the occasionally drifter and straggler, but the majority of our parishioners have been attending this church throughout their lives, some families for generations.”

“Of course, Pastor. Did one’a’them generational families donate tha’ alter in there?”

“Yes, in fact.”

“Min’ givin’ us a name?”

The pastor shifted. “I don’t understand why acts of generosity would be met with suspicion, Levi.”

Levi smirked dangerously and Erwin took that as a cue. “Pastor, we ain’t suspectin’ none’a’yer parishioners. Wha’ Detective Levi ain’t sayin’ is that the body is uh...displayed, inside, on yer alter. If’n someone was real proud-like ‘bout donatin’ it, an’ that person had an enemy er, say, someone jealous of ’em, that could be considered a motive.”

Nichols nodded thoughtfully, pressing his lips together. “Well, it was an anonymous gift, detective. I’m afraid it was meant to be made with only God’s knowledge, to avoid the sin of pride.”

“But,” Levi broke in, “You *are* aware’a who gave it?”

“Of course, I had to accept the delivery, but I’m afraid I have a right to keep that information between myself and God.”

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“I’ll tell ya what, Levi, yer gonna wanna steer clear’a Nichols ‘less ya got some real strong reason’ta think we’re gonna need ‘im.”

They were sitting on the trunk of their department-issued town car, the two of them munching on shrimp tacos as they discussed their next move.

“Why? He some kinda big shot?”

Erwin snorted. “I know you seen ‘is car ‘n clothes ‘n watch. You think ‘e got that kinda money from tha church? That broken down ol’ place?”

“Course ‘e didn’,” Levi frowned, putting aside his tacos and pulling out his notebook. “Couldn’ quite get’tha brands on ‘is clothes, bu’tha watch was a Rolex...shoes coulda been Italian, hard’ta say. I seen pastors dress that way in ol’ Bentonville, but they got them mega churches there’n’all, an’ anyway they’re all crooked as a mountain road.”

“Crooked...” Erwin muttered, tucking in to his third taco, “This ain’t no mega church, but crooked don’t seem ta be too far off tha mark.”

“I wanna know who donated tha alter, an’ I wanna know why ‘e’s protectin’ ‘em.”

Erwin hesitated, chewing his food slowly as if to give himself an excuse to stay quiet. Levi turned and stared at him, his eyes widening slowly.

“You don’ wanna go after this guy, do ya?”

Erwin swallowed roughly and shook his head. “Now c’mon, Levi, I didn’ say that. I’m jus’ sayin’ there’s the...powers that be, ya know? An’ they are what they are. Look, I let you chase whatever bee crawls up yer ass whenever ya wan’, but this’s different, ya know? This is...the fat cats. Ya can’t jus’ mess wi’ Old Religion in these parts.” Levi opened his mouth, but Erwin held up a hand to silence him. “Ya got somethin’ more solid’n a hunch, I’ll be tha firs’ ta defend it ta tha chief, but Levi, ya gotta have somethin’ *serious* if’n yer gonna go after these guys.”

“You know’s’well’s I do that I ain’t gonna find somethin’ if I ain’t allowed’ta look,” Levi spat out, snapping his notebook shut. Erwin looked over at him with an eyebrow raised. “An’ take off them damn glasses if yer gonna talk ta me, I hate seein’ myself in ‘em when yer pissin me off.”

Erwin straightened his back; at his full height, the difference in their size was really quite surprising. Carefully, he wiped his fingers, each one individually and then his palm, then pressed his lips together and removed his sunglasses ever so slowly, examining their mirror-finish lenses before tucking them into the front pocket of his shirt. He took a deep pointed breath, then sighed it out with a whistling noise. “You done throwin’ yer piss fit?” he finally asked, his voice even. Levi looked to be practically vibrating with anger. He grabbed what remained of his lunch, hurled it into the trashcan, and stomped over to his side of the car before getting inside and slamming the door so hard Erwin wondered for a moment if it would come off the hinges. With a shrug, Erwin sat just where he was and finished his tacos, the smell of Levi’s cigarette wafting back to find him as he ate. Lovely.

When he was finished, Erwin tossed his trash away and got in the car, pulling in a deep breath before he spoke.

“Look, Levi, I ain't sayin' we can't follow up on yer hunch, but we're gonna have'ta exhaust our other options firs'. Ya said ya thought she was a workin' girl? Les get an ID firs', then maybe we can rustle up some prosts'ta question.”

Levi was quiet, smoking out the window and seemingly ignoring Erwin with practiced ease.

“sides, we gotta wait on tha evidence. I know yer excited 'bout gettin' on a real case, here, but we can't afford'ta get ahead'a ourselves. Let's get back'ta tha lab, talk ta tha coroner, fin' out wha' happen'd to'er, get an ID, all that shit. Okay?”

Levi took a long, deep drag, the green countryside flashing past them as he sucked the smoke into his lungs. He exhaled in a thin stream of grey-blue, most of which was sucked away by the wind whipping past his open window. Then, finally, he spoke. “You enjoyin' it, Smith?”

“Enjoyin' what, exactly, Levi?”

“Bein' a fuckin' cog in that circle jerk of'n ol'boys club ya call a justice dee-part-ment?” He accented every syllable of the last word, pulling it through his teeth and spitting it out all at once, the mockery in his tone as clear as a summer's day.

“Will you shut yer fool fuckin' mouth fer one secon' an' think? Wha's wrong with waitin' fer the evidence?”

“That preacher? He was given' us tha run aroun'. An' now, he fuckin' knows we're gonna be onta' him, one way'er another. He's gonna start batonin' down the fuckin' hatches and by the time we get a fuckin' warrant he'n his friends'r gonna be ten steps ahead, because Senior fuckin' Detective Erwin fuckin' Smith was too fuckin' chicken shit'ta go after 'im when we had the fuckin' chance.”

Erwin wasn't sure if he was furious, impressed, or shocked. Levi was being a righteous little fuck head, and Erwin didn't appreciate being called chicken shit. But it was that undercurrent of anger...not anger, *rage*, it permeated every fiber of Levi's being and held him together in a way that blood and bones never could. Erwin felt that rage, felt it reverberating through him, felt it tap into a part of him he hadn't acknowledged in so long—a searing revelation, a fierce understanding. “Now hold the fuckin' phone,” he started, but some part of him wondered, against his better judgement, what would happen if Levi was let off his leash.

“Yeah?”

“Wha' tha fuck department were you in 'fore you came here?”

Levi was silent.

“What, James Bond, is it fucking confidential?”

He waited a beat. Levi squashed his cigarette butt in the car's ashtray and crossed his arms, his lips resolutely closed.

“Oh c'mon, Chatty Kathy! A minute ago ya couldn't shut tha hell up'n now yer playin' dead? Where'd yer bravado go then, hoss? Huh?”

Without warning, Levi slammed his hands on the dash, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps. Erwin raised his brows, slowing down a bit, his heart racing, blood screaming in his ears. The tension in the air was thicker than a summer night in the bayou. He could feel it constricting his throat, a black fog creeping to the edges of his vision. Then, all at once and without warning the moment faded, receded, Levi sinking into his seat, Erwin's pulse slowing back to something more like normal, the two of them breathing, driving.

Levi lit a cigarette. Erwin opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again.

Finally, when the cigarette was burned half away, Levi broke the silence.

"I was in Narco. Don' ever fuckin' ask me 'bout my past, Smith. It don't matter an' it ain't important. An if it is, I'll tell ya. So jus'..." He took a drag, blew it out slowly. "Jus' lay off."

They rode back to the station in silence.

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Levi had no intention of waiting on an ID; there was a killer on the loose, and if no one in this god forsaken sleeping giant of a backwoods department was willing to wake the fuck up, he would take it upon himself to do what needed to be done. He told Erwin that he was exhausted and cut out early, despite Erwin's protests about "evidence" and "protocol". That was fine when the perp was locked away, but hunting a monster required actually *hunting*, not sitting behind a desk and waiting on someone to come along and hand you an envelope with all of the answers. If that was how these down-home detectives operated, Levi wasn't surprised at the tales of horror that came from the Delta; they were too busy sucking back beers and slapping each other's backs to bother with the roughshod work of scraping the underbelly clean.

Back in his unfurnished apartment, Levi dug through cardboard boxes of clothing. When he'd come here, they'd told him he needed to conform as much as he could.

*"Don't act like you didn't want this. It may not be exciting, but you still get to catch your bad guys so I don't wanna hear any bitching, we clear?"*

He could hear his handler's voice like it was yesterday. No one could understand why he was giving up on his pension, on his cushy life, retirement with full benefits at the age of 30...it was most men's dream come true. For Levi, it was a death sentence. He wasn't entirely convinced, however, that conformity was any better.

*"Shirt and tie every day. Keep your head down and don't go all crazy on people. Try not to talk about your fucked up philosophy shit, believe me, Crash, nobody wants to hear that shit."*

He'd stopped at a rotary club thrift store in Baton Rouge and bought seven shirts, three pairs of pants, and three ties. He'd stored everything about Crash away in boxes, boxes that now stood stacked against the walls of his bedroom, which was really a living room with a mattress in it. He hadn't much cared which room was meant to be used for what in this place when he moved in...it hadn't much mattered. This room had no fireplace, but it did have a

mantle that he could fill with books, and a little nail in the wall for his crucifix. That was more important than an arbitrary label. Who decided, anyway, what room belonged to which purpose? The person who owned the house, why the hell not.

Digging through the boxes, pulling out the clothes—it was a strange sensation. Steel-toe boots, tight fitting jeans, leather vests, shirts with the arms cut off, everything reeking of stale cigarettes and pot. He pulled out a slim-fitting Morgoth t-shirt but decided the imagery on the front was too provocative. Even on a mission like this, he still needed to conform...to blend as much as he could. Eventually he settled on worn blue jeans, black boots, a grey Budweiser t-shirt and a baseball cap with the silhouette of a naked woman on the front. He'd smashed all the mirrors in the house when he first moved in, save one small shard he'd glued to the wall. Even so, he could see enough of himself to know he looked as close to native as he was going to. The locals could smell his roots on him, it seemed, but if he appeared to belong, they would leave him alone. He hoped so, anyway.

Almost as an afterthought, he tucked his badge into his back pocket. He was ready.

Forty-five minutes later, he was pulling into a truck stop outside Erath, a few miles from the scene of the crime. With truck stops came lot lizards, and this truck stop functioned primarily as a bar. Levi parked his truck and waited, watched. After an hour or so, he had seen three blonds and two brunettes stumble out of trucks and head on into the bar. He had his marks. Sauntering inside with an easy gait, he sidled up to two of the girls who were standing at the bar, laughing and talking between themselves.

“Good evenin’, ladies,” he started. They looked at him with interest, assessing his potential as client until he flashed his badge discretely. Both of them groaned and made to walk away but he shook his head. “I ain’t here’ta get ya’ll in trouble. Jus’ lemme talk ta ya fer a minute.”

The looks that they offered him were dubious, but he pressed on, slipping a twenty from his wallet. “I’ll buy drinks.”

Moments later, they were settling down into a booth, each of the girls nursing at a double while Levi passed out cigarettes. “Mah name’s Detective Levi.”

“Betsy,” the blond said with a wry smile.

“Monica,” the brunette added.

“Pleased ta meet ya’ll,” he offered with a nod. “Now I need’ta know if ya’ll been missin’ anyone roun’ here lately.”

The girls tossed each other a look as he passed his zippo to the blond. She lit her cigarette and frowned at him.

“Yer gonna hafta be more ‘spific,” she said, already sounding bored. “This bein’ a high-traffic sorta area’n’all, we ain’t liable ta notice somebody gon’ missin’. Everybody comes’n’goes here.”

“You’da prob’ly r’membered’er,” Levi broke in, “On account’a she was a red head. Lot’sa freckles. Bad teeth.”

Monica raised a brow. “Lottie?” she said, and then, shaking her head, “Dumb bitch.”

“Why’dya say that?” Levi asked, tilting his head as he sucked down a drag.

“She was always high as a fuckin’ kite,” Monica replied, shrugging.

“And it ain’t jus’ tha regular stuff. She had the fuckin’...I don’ ‘member wha’tha’ shit was called, but fucked ya up real proper. Had a design like...sorta a star?” Betsy added.

Levi felt his blood run cold. “Pinwheel?” He asked, eyes widening slightly as his mouth felt suddenly dry.

“Yeah, think so,” Betsy replied, shifting uncomfortably.

*Jesus fuck.* Levi thought to himself as he said, “Ya’ll know where she was gettin’ it?”

They looked at one another, wary. Levi slipped another twenty on to the table, nodding at Monica. “Go grab another round,” he said pointedly. Monica looked at Betsy, who looked uncomfortable, but nodded anyway. When they were alone, Levi leaned over the table and looked her in the eyes.

“Betsy, I’m murder p’lice. Lottie’s dead, honey, an’ I ain’t here’ta bust anybody. Far’s I know I came in t’night, had a beer’n left. I never seen ya an’ I certainly couldn’t pick ya outta a crowd. So please, jus’ be a dear’n tell me where yer frien’ Lottie got’er Pinwheel.”

Betsy shifted uncomfortably and slurped at her drink, looking around, biting her lips. Finally she stood, moved over to Levi’s side of the booth, and edged in like he’d hired her for a handjob. She reached under the table, her hand moving up his thigh, but Levi stopped it’s movement with an iron grip. “Tha’ won’ be necessary,” he muttered. “Jus’ play-act, alrigh’?”

She nodded, leaning in to his ear. Her breath smelled sour, like old booze and cigarettes. Levi couldn’t wait to wash this place off. “All I can tell ya,” she murmured softly, “Is she woul’ disappear-like...fer a few days. An’ when she came on back, she was a fuckin’ wreck, bu’ she’d have tha’ Pinwheel, like, by tha handful, ya know? We all bought off’er. She never said who ‘er s’pplier was...only that...only that she ‘ad ta do some real crazy shit’ta get tha stuff. Sex parties ’n shit. Tha’s all I know, I swear.”

Levi nodded, tipping his head back like he was enjoying what she was doing. “When she gone missin’?” He asked quietly.

“Coupl’a weeks ago,” Betsy answered.

“An’ you ain’t seen anythin’...weird ‘r outta the ordinary?” he asked.

“Nah. Ya sure you don’ wanna lil’...somethin’, detective? I won’ tell, n’ya look like ya could use it.”



“No, thank ya. Jus’ one more thing...”

“Yes?” she asked, still pretending to pump him.

“Ya got any Pinwheel on ya?”

“Nah, s’pplies run dry,” she answered. Levi nodded, relaxed, she stopped her movement under the table. They looked at one another, and Levi grimaced.

“Don’ git yerself killed. I might need’ta come back.”

“Fer more questions?” she asked, dusting herself off. “Or fer a real han’job?”

“Neither,” Levi said, pushing his way out of the booth, “Fer drugs.”

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There was an aspect of police work that no one liked to discuss; time. On a case, especially a murder case, endless days seemed to pass in the pursuit of evidence, in following up leads, in questioning and interviews. The coroner still hadn’t managed to get them an ID, and due to incredibly extensive internal damage, was having trouble getting them the results of the autopsy in a quick manner. They’d put the squeeze on him and finally, three days after the fact, the report was due to be sent over that afternoon. Levi was jumpy as ever, and Erwin was worried that he wasn’t sleeping at all these days. When he brought it up, however, Levi just brushed him off. Still, Pixie’s warning stuck in his head. Levi couldn’t afford to get all crazy about this or they were bound to lose the case.

Levi had the clay man at his desk and he was staring at it with bloodshot, shadowed eyes. Erwin sat with his fingers poised over his typewriter but his eyes fixed on Levi. They had a veritable mountain of evidence, but none of it was leading anywhere. Prints didn’t match anything in the system, fibers weren’t identifiable, shoe treads were generic men’s tennis shoes...none of it led anywhere, and the unknown was straining on them as the reality of a killer on the loose hung over them all.

And the press...Erwin was sure that Nile had leaked the case, but now they were crawling everywhere, with members of the church giving interviews to anyone who would listen. Everyone had something to say about motive and possibilities and who the victim might be, but no one had anything concrete. It was maddening, but the job often was. Erwin was used to it by now. Levi...well, he wasn’t sure about Levi.

“Got a gift fer ya,” Brenda said, interrupting his reverie.

“Oh yeah?” Erwin said, turning around with a start. As soon as he saw her, he fixed her in a smile. “Imagine that. Brenda, always brightenin’ mah day,”

“Don’cha know it!” She laughed, plunking a file down on his desk. Erwin flipped it open and saw the first page of the autopsy report.

“Finally!” He said, loud enough to make Levi perk up and pay attention to him.

“Did it show up?” Levi asked, suddenly wide awake and sitting up.

“Sure did,” Erwin said, grinning.

“Fuck yes,” Levi breathed, more lively than Erwin had seen him in days. He hopped around to Erwin’s side of the desk where the detective was already spreading out the pages. The two of them began poring over it without a word, each of them reading through it in their own time, gathering their thoughts.

She was in her mid twenties, had recently had intercourse, though there was no semen inside of her. She had been beaten savagely over the course of several hours, though she must have been unconscious for most of it, as her defensive wounds were minimal, considering. She was drugged heavily, her blood test returning Oxycontin, LSD, and something else that they were still analyzing. She had fractures all over her body as well as several broken ribs, a broken clavicle, and a crushed trachea. Stab wounds were all post mortem. The blood between her legs was, indeed, from a rabbit, though the girl had hemorrhaged profusely. Several of her internal organs were ruptured, and she had an incredibly deep human bite mark directly above the left buttock. She had ligature marks on her wrists and fainter ones on her legs, where she hadn’t been tied as much or as tightly. She had been dead nearly twenty-four hours when they found her, though she had been moved, and had only been in the church for about five hours.

Erwin opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a word out, his phone started ringing. “Hold on,” he muttered, picking it up with a brisk, “Detective Smith...”

“I got yer ID, jus’ verified ‘er name’s Lottie Jenkins. Las’ known residence an’ family’s bein’ sent on over now.” Erwin sighed with relief. He thanked the officer and hung up, turning to Levi with a grin. “When it rains, it pours,” he said smugly. Just then, Sergeant Pixis walked up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Ya don’ know the half of it,” he said, grim.

“Yer killer got another’n. Jus’ found ‘er next’a Lake Peigneur.”

## Chapter End Notes

Please Note: "Pinwheel" is a fictional drug created for the purposes of this fic. It will figure in VERY heavily to the storyline. I promise there will be a lot of explanation in future chapters but that's all I'm saying for now. ;)

# Brackishness

## Chapter Summary

Within moments, he was hiking down the shoreline, his feet protesting in shoes that were not meant for this kind of work, cigarettes forgotten in his pocket, an old familiar voice echoing in the halls of his mind, “*You gotta stop going rogue, son. That shit wont fly down South.*” Levi *tsked* and kept moving, trying to stay toward the shore to avoid the worst of the underbrush. Aside from the lawns of the few homes on the edge of the lake, it was predominantly left unmanicured. Levi didn’t care — his eyes were flying between the trees and ground, seeking footprints, a trail of broken branches and disturbed underbrush, *anything*.

## Chapter Notes

Bad, bad Levi.

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They parked on a dirt road next to the lake, the two of them grim, still in shock.

“K-9 units on their way?” Erwin barked at the first officer he saw.

“Yessir,” he replied, standing up a little straighter. “We done called ‘em twen’y minutes ago.”

Erwin nodded as he walked toward the scene, Levi a silent shadow in his wake.

“Over here, d’tective,” an officer called, waving from the banks of the lake. As they got closer, it was easy to see that the body was partially submerged, the water lapping gently at it’s knees. As requested, it had not been moved. Erwin and Levi both snapped on Latex gloves as they neared the other officers.

“Funny how they’re all over’er now tha’ we ain’t in no church,” Levi noted sardonically, rolling his eyes. Erwin didn’t even bother with a reply.

“Where is it?” Levi asked an officer standing off to the side.

“Over’ere,” he said, ducking down and lifting a small, clear evidence bag. “Foun’ it stickin’ outta ‘er mouth.”

Levi took the bag and lifted it, examining the small clay man, his expression dopey, a disturbingly large and accurate set of genitalia molded between his legs. He’d been practically bitten in half by the body of the victim as rigor mortis kicked in, but otherwise, he was exactly the same as the one they’d discovered on the last body. Levi didn’t realize he was gritting his teeth until Erwin clapped his back lightly.

“C’mon,” he said, “We gotta check this out.”

Levi obliged, handing the clay man off for now, pulling a mask of neutrality over his features. The body was, for the most part, strikingly similar to the other. Female, twenties, intense bruising across her skin. Levi kneeled down beside her, checking the lividity of the skin toward her back, comparing it with the unbruised portions of her chest. He checked her teeth, the post-mortem stab wounds in her belly and thighs, the ligature marks on her wrists. Her ankles were in the water, but the rest of her was lodged firmly in the mud. He noted fine scratching on her legs, and upon checking, found similar scratching on the arms. Sitting back, he began sketching her with quick, fine precision.

“We need’ta fin’ out wha’ tha scratchin’s from,” he started, “Looks abrasive, like a Brillo pad’r some shit. Who found ‘er?”

“Local was walkin’ with ‘er dog this mornin’, dog ran ahead, started barkin’, she caught up’n foun’ this shit. Damn near traumatized ‘er.”

“She didn’ see anybody fleein’ tha scene?”

“No sir, jus’ tha dog barkin’ at the body.”

Levi hummed thoughtfully as Erwin sighed, “When K-9 gets here, have ‘em start canvassing the area. Killer could’a ran ‘fore the local came up on tha scene. If so, he ain’t far.”

“Tha techs ‘re busy, aren’ they?” Levi noted, scribbling away in his sketchbook. “This killer ain’t concerned w’leavin’ evidence. He only cares ‘bout whatever ‘is ‘mission’ happens’ta’be. An this...this’ sloppy work. I don’ think he had a chance’ta finish.”

“Dog in’errupted ‘im, he ran, an’ by tha time we got ‘ere he was long gone, is that it?” Erwin asked, frowning.

“Near as I can fig’ger, ‘cept I don’ buy ‘e’s long gone er wha’ever,” Levi replied. “She ain’t properly displayed. No animal sacrifice. I think...” his eyes widened, and he crouched before the body again. “I think he was washin’ ‘er. Like a fuckin’ raccoon. An he didn’ get’ta finish.”

“Raccoons wash their food,” Erwin said, skeptical. “He wasn’ plannin’ on eatin’ ‘er, was ‘e?”

“Unlikely,” Levi muttered. “Coulda’ been a ritual thing though, sacrificial-like.”

“Detectives!” An officer called, “Yer gonna’ wanna see this shit.”

The officer was standing next to a tree, pointing to a symbol on it. As Levi came closer, he felt his gut dropping, turning. Side by side, he and Erwin stood, staring up at an incredibly detailed carving of a man in the tree trunk, his legs the legs of a goat, his head horned, a host of stars carved above him, an enormous phallus protruding from between his legs. He held something in his hands, but Erwin couldn't quite make it out. He leaned closer, stared.

"It's Pan." Levi muttered.

"Who?" Erwin asked, turning to raise a brow.

"Pan... 'e was tha god a' shepherds, more recently favored'ta be a symbol'a Satanism."

"Yeah? Wha's that 'e's holdin'?"

"Near's I can fig'ger...it's a pinwheel."

"Well what the *hell's* tha devil doin' with'a pinwheel?" Erwin asked, rubbing his hand over his face. Levi just shrugged.

"What in-deed."

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It was nearly half an hour before the K-9 unit showed up. Every minute felt like nails on a chalkboard to Levi, like a hand closing around his neck. It was clear that the killer hadn't had the chance to finish his work, and this was a ritual...the bathing, the wounds, the woodcarving. If he hadn't finished, he would come back, and if he wanted to come back, he would have stuck close. The hairs on the back of Levi's neck prickled uncomfortably and he sucked down one cigarette after another, but none of it made a difference. The killer was there, he was nearby, and Levi was just standing there with the rest of them like some dumbass troupe of clowns, combing through evidence and missing the forest for the trees.

Finally, though, they were there, along with more officers than Levi would have expected Southern Louisiana to contain. In a careful formation, with the dogs in the lead, they fanned out through the fields and the tall grass. Levi noted privately that none of them even seemed ready to draw their gun. "Are we lookin' fer a murderer," he asked Erwin, "Or playin' hide 'n seek?" Erwin shushed him, though, and with a frown, Levi walked faster, made his way up toward the dogs.

"They ain't catchin' the scent?" he asked the handler.

"Nah, d'tective, they ain't gettin' nothin'."

"Whatta ya'll s'pose tha chances are that...that 'e done jumped in tha lake?"

"Well, I s'pose 'e could'a..."

"It ain't too far ta swim, I don't think. He could'a jus' swam up tha way, too."

"Nah, not too far if'n ya were determined n'all, but tha lake is saltwater, ya know."

“Saltwater?”

“Yeah, on account’ a tha disaster back in Eighty. Drillin’ accident put a hole in tha bottom’ a’ tha lake, sucked all tha water down jus’ like a bathtub, n’ all the oil rigs with it. She refilled from tha deltas. So. Saltwater.”

“Tha’s the craziest shit I ever heard,” Levi said, eyes wide. “Ya’ll done got some wild shit down ‘ere.”

“You ain’t lyin’, d’tective.”

“Well anyway, if’n ‘e can swim it...why ain’t we dispatchin’ a dog over thattaway?”

“We only got two dogs, d’tective. We can only cover s’much territory...”

Levi hissed out a curse and doubled back to find Erwin. He was walking with another officer, the two of them shooting the breeze as they walked, yammering on about this and that, the sight of it making Levi so livid he was practically shaking by the time he found himself confronting Erwin.

“Hey, I thought we were investigatin’ a murder here, not havin’ a god damn social hour,” he hissed up at Erwin, who frowned.

“Levi, tha dogs’ll start barkin’ if’n they smell somethin’ off, ya know, it ain’t like we’re gonna *miss* the killer in tha grass.”

“Or, maybe, we ain’t even lookin’ in the right place, which yer fool head ain’t even considered yet.”

“What...ya think tha killer gone off’n jumped in tha lake?”

“He might’a done that, yeah, an we ain’t gonna know ‘till we get a fuckin’ dog over there.”

“We only got tha two dogs,” Erwin said, prompting a snort from Levi.

“Don’t fuckin’ hide behind yer backwoods incompetence, Smith. Why don’cha fuckin’ tell them ta take one a them dogs on over ta tha other side. I’ll go with ‘em.”

“Now hold on a fuckin’ minute,” Erwin started, his expression clouding the way it always did when Levi got up his ass about something.

“No, I’m not holdin’ on. None of ya’ll morons seem cognizant a’tha fact we got a fuckin’ killer on tha loose. Ya’ll are jus’ fartin’ ‘round with yer thumbs up yer asses waitin’ fer this killer’ta pop out an say ‘Boo,’ an fer some reason ya think that’s gonna cut it? Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me?”

“Levi, pipe tha fuck down fer a hot minute,” Erwin started, “What I was gonna say b’fore ya got all fuckin’ uppity on me was that ’s more likely he run through tha fields than jump on in the lake. An’ even if he *did* jump, he’d be up tha way a tic, not on tha whole other fuckin’ side’a tha thing.”

“Why, ‘cuz it’s salty?”

“Well yeah, an it’s thirteen-hunnerd feet deep. That’s enough’ta scare anybody off.”

“Erwin, yer comittin’ a murder...ya get caught by somebody’s fuckin’ mutt, you honestly think yer gonna care ‘bout a little brackishness in yer ‘scape route?”

“It ain’t jus’ brackishness, did ya miss tha part about tha fuckin’ vortex’a doom in there? An anyway it don’ change tha fact e’s more likely ta run through tha fields than go through tha water, an we gotta use our resources wisely, here.”

It was mid-afternoon, but the sun was already setting. Levi felt his hand tremble, so he flexed his fingers and shook his head. The anxiety was crawling up the back of his throat like bile, and still no one else seemed to see the futility of combing a field when the dogs weren’t even barking. With a sigh, Levi brought two fingers up to check his pulse, his heart beating out an unruly rhythm beneath his fingertips.

“Listen ta’ me, now. Seriously, Erwin, please. If’n tha dogs ain’t barkin’ soon, we *got* to try tha other side’a tha lake b’fore the sun sets.”

“Levi, we can only do wha’ we can do. I’ll ask tha chief if we can git r’selves another K-9 unit, alrigh’?”

“It ain’t good enough,” Levi hissed, turning on his heel and tramping back through the tall grass toward their car. If Erwin wasn’t going to help him, he was going to do it himself.

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Levi sat in the car, radioing back to headquarters with a frown and an ever-worsening headache, his hands shaking as he confirmed, “Yer sayin’ we can’t get another K-9 unit ‘till tomorra’?”

“You got it, detective,” the voice crackled. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Levi wanted to scream, wanted to yell that “sorry” was useless, it was bullshit, it wouldn’t keep them safe in their beds at night, it wouldn’t stop this killer from killing, but oh, they probably didn’t care, because what was the life of a prost worth anyway? Probably less than the work she did, in the eyes of this lot. His fingers rose to his pulse again, his eyes to the setting sun, and as his heart beat thrummed wildly through him, a decision was reached.

Within moments, he was hiking down the shoreline, his feet protesting in shoes that were not meant for this kind of work, cigarettes forgotten in his pocket, an old familiar voice echoing in the halls of his mind, “*You gotta stop going rogue, son. That shit wont fly down South.*” Levi *tsked* and kept moving, trying to stay toward the shore to avoid the worst of the underbrush. Aside from the lawns of the few homes on the edge of the lake, it was predominantly left unmanicured. Levi didn’t care — his eyes were flying between the trees and ground, seeking footprints, a trail of broken branches and disturbed underbrush, *anything*.

Erwin didn't notice that his partner was missing as he trudged through the tall grass, followed the wagging tails of the dogs. He assumed that Levi had stomped off somewhere, but that they were all still sweeping through the tall grasses as a unit, thirty or so officers and two dogs with acres and acres to cover. He didn't want to admit that the effort felt almost futile, but their manpower was so limited that he felt outnumbered, if only by woods and fields and the seemingly limitless space around the. Levi's frustration was natural—it struck a chord with Erwin in a way that he didn't want to admit. They'd barely gotten an ID before the killer struck again, and he was likely to kill again before the week was out. There were myriad unanswered questions, and considering the woodcarving of that...goat man, and the desecration of the church, the killer appeared to have some kind of serious issue with God, or those who worshipped him.

Truth be told, Erwin was more concerned about the press than anything. Not a whole lot happened around these parts, and something like this was bound to make headlines all the way up to Baton Rouge. If they didn't get a lid on this killer soon, they were risking intervention by any number of outside sources...especially with a big shot like Nichols involved. And, for what might have been the hundredth time, Erwin found himself wondering just how Nichols was involved. Perhaps he was nothing more than an unfortunate man who had a murder in his precious church, but Levi seemed to think there was more going on there...

Erwin's thoughts were interrupted when another officer blew a whistle. Erwin jogged through the grass to see what was going on, but it was a false alarm—a set of clothes that had probably been mouldering in that field for a year. The officers cracked jokes about the poor bastard whose entire outfit had been left behind in a field, but the jokes held an undercurrent of tension; they were losing light quickly, far too quickly, and the dogs still weren't barking.

With a sigh, Erwin doubled back and walked along the loosely-arranged line of officers until he found the local officer that had called them in. "Listen," he said, "I'm gonna need a' least two of yer boys ou' here t'night, keepin' an eye on tha scene ta see whether'r not tha killer tries'n comes back."

The officer looked at him with a frown. "Ya don' think we're gonna find nothin' t'day, do ya?" he asked quietly.

"No, sir, I don'," Erwin confirmed.

"Well...fuck," the officer muttered. Erwin nodded in agreement.

"Speakin' of, you ain't seen mah partner roun' here, have ya?"

"Uh...he was huffin' round earlier, but I ain't seen him in a hour a' least..."

"Tha's what I thought...wonder where 'e went?"

"Sorry, d'tective, I got nuthin'."

Erwin nodded, clapped the officer on the back, and jogged back to the car, wondering if Levi was there. Even if he disagreed with the way that the investigation was being handled, it was



hard to imagine him going back to the car to pout. Even so, it was the last place Erwin had seen him headed, and he figured it was as good a place to look as any. He opened the car door to find nothing. Except the radio handset sitting on the seat, everything was as he had left it. With a frown, Erwin picked up the radio, hesitating for a moment before he called in to ask dispatch when Levi had last checked in. They responded back that he'd called about an hour earlier requesting additional K-9 units. Erwin rolled his eyes and thanked the dispatch. Hadn't he told Levi they were doing everything they could?

Frustrated, he pulled a pair of binoculars out of the glove compartment and peered through them. As he scanned the heads of the officers tramping through the fields, a pit of dread bloomed deep in his gut.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head as he looked around a bit more frantically. "No, no no, ya didn'....you did not, Levi..." and yet, despite his protestations, it seemed that Levi indeed had.

With a string of curses, Erwin rounded the car and unlocked the trunk, digging past a few rifles and a tool box to find an old pair of hiking boots. They were beat to hell, but they were better than the office shoes he was required to wear on the job. He pulled them on quickly, trying to ignore the thin material of his slacks and how useless it was bound to be against the underbrush in the woods around the lake. At least Levi didn't have boots...he couldn't have gotten too far, Erwin reasoned. He could still be caught.

Erwin jogged back to the officers to tell them he had to go check another lead, and to make sure to keep eyes on the scene at all times. That completed, he was back in the car, driving half a mile down the main road before pulling off and parking. He could only hope his hunch about Levi's whereabouts were correct...and that Levi didn't find the killer before Erwin could find Levi.

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It was fairly rare that Levi regretted his smoking habit. More often than not, he couldn't be bothered to feel bad about lighting up, not even around others. It was his decision to smoke, and their decision to be around him...or at least, that's what he'd been told. In his opinion, the advertisements made it impossible to ignore the damn things, especially once you found yourself addicted. At least his other addictions weren't prominently displayed down the highways as he drove...well, aside from alcohol. All that aside, that two-packs a day business was on his mind as his breath came in shortened gasps. He'd been pushing through underbrush for what he assumed was the better part of an hour, and as the light died around him, a searing pain was shooting up through his lungs.

Despite everything, somehow he still found himself craving a damn cigarette, but he wasn't about to indulge. He had a killer to catch.

Levi didn't believe in chance or fortune, so when he stopped to catch his breath at the lake shore and found himself staring down at a relatively fresh, perfectly formed footprint in the mud in the dying light, he didn't bother with awe or wonderment, opting instead to use the pale pink light of the setting sun to follow the trail of broken underbrush that seemed to be stretching out before him. His heart was pounding in his ears as the light faded, but he didn't

dare turn on his flashlight; he was likely to have one chance to catch this guy, and he was already in danger of alerting him with the noise of shuffling leaves and snapping twigs.

He was alone, which meant the element of surprise was paramount. At this point, it was his only real advantage. Despite his mounting impatience, Levi moved as carefully as he could, hoping that the ever-present noises of the woods would provide some semblance of cover. The light was nearly gone now, the moon peeking through the trees in shafts, providing a slight silver sheen just bright enough for Levi to follow the trail if he went slow. His saving grace was in the way that the killer had quite obviously crashed through the brush, either unaware of or unworried by the thought of pursuit. Part of Levi wondered if he should have just staked out the crime scene and waited — after all, judging by the amount of evidence left behind, this killer didn't seem overly concerned with being caught. He'd not returned to the church, though, so the chances were slim. And anyway, it was too late to go back now.

As he pushed through the brush and stepped carefully over branches, Levi wondered how angry Erwin would be at him for this transgression. Imagining the blustering anger he would use to cover the depth of his concern amused Levi, and he nearly smiled at the thought. *Sorry, Smith*, he thought, scrambling over a felled tree, *Ya jus' didn' wanna listen, an' I didn' wanna wait.*

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Erwin made his way to the shore first and then moved along it, alternating between a fast walk and a slow jog in the failing light. He figured that he had to be moving faster than Levi, and as he went along, he listened for any noise that felt out of place. Regardless of his searching, there was no sign of Levi, or of any trail that looked fresh. “You fuckin’ moron,” he grumbled under his breath. “Gettin’ a bee up yer ass an’ runnin’ off like some teenage girl, god fuckin’ damnit, an’ now it’s up ta me ta save yer shit ‘cuz you were too damn smart’n couldn’ wait fer a damn dog ya god damn pisshead fucker...” and on and on. He was nearly ready to turn around and double back when something caught his eye; there, hanging from a branch at the shoreline, was a State Police jacket that could only have been Levi’s.

“Christ”, Erwin grumbled, staring at the jacket, wondering at it’s careful placement, “Ya got further than I thought’ya would, ya son of a bitch.”

He snatched the jacket off the branch where it hung and pushed into the woods, following the broken trail of brush and straining his eyes for any further signs that Levi had been there recently. Try as he might, the only thing he could find were the broken branches and flattened undergrowth of a fresh trail. Doggedly, he followed.

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Levi’s breath was hitching in his throat, coming in shallow gasps as the night pressed around him. It was a bad, bad time for this, for these lights to be dancing before his eyes, for the voices of the woodland creatures to mingle together in a never-ending scream, for the dead-eyed ghosts of his past to be standing before him in a line, blocking his view of a clearing with a cabin in the center...a cabin that he was sure contained the killer that he sought.

“Shoo,” he hissed at them, too cautious to speak above the slightest of whispers. As always, it didn’t work, their dead eyes staring in unblinking judgement, crawling under his skin, daring him to deny the reality of them standing before him in favor of what should have been an empty clearing. Levi swallowed hard just as a frog started up its strange song right beside him. The sudden influx of noise made him jump, a stick cracking beneath his foot as his weight shifted unexpectedly. The ghosts swayed before him, and the light inside the cabin went dark.

He had lost the element of surprise.

He wasn’t going to waste time cursing himself. Instead he moved in, drawing his gun but leaving the safety on, gripping it by the barrel in a pistol-whip fashion. He wasn’t about to kill this fucker; he needed answers and he was damn well going to get them. He couldn’t see anything beyond the ghosts before him, but he knew from experience that if he advanced on them, they would move aside. He just had to do it. Mentally, he buttoned himself down, pulled himself together, steeling over all the parts of him that still felt human. Humanity was a luxury he could not always afford.

One breath, air pulled deep into his lungs through his mouth, pushed out through his nostrils and then he was pushing through the ghosts, moving in quick quiet steps toward the house, toward a shadowy corner that he would have to rely on to hide him until he could ascertain his next move. Time stretched out, his legs like taffy beneath him, but then he was there, pressing his back against the foundation, steadying his breath as his heart beat a wild tattoo inside his chest. The ghosts had turned to watch him, but they were no longer between himself and his objective. He raised a middle finger to them. He listened. He waited.

Then he heard them; footsteps were making their way across the porch around the corner from where he was hiding. It occurred to him that if he could sneak into the house while the killer was looking for him, he could regain his element of surprise by attacking when the killer came back inside. The footsteps echoed off the stairs, and had Levi been a praying man, he might have prayed that they would go the opposite direction. As it were, he just hoped, and by what might have been a miracle, he did not hope in vain. He listened carefully as the footsteps found grass and receded away, toward the other side of the house.

One breath. Two. *Move.*

As quietly as he could manage, Levi moved to the stairs, stealing up them and distributing his weight carefully to avoid the tell-tale squeaking of warped wood. All at once, he was on the porch. To his relief, the door was hanging open on old hinges. Levi stepped inside, moved behind the door, pressed himself flat against the wall, and waited.

He wasn’t sure of the time that passed; time wasn’t working well for him these days, and for a moment he worried that the killer had left the cabin in order to keep running. But then the footsteps returned, coming up the stairs slowly, cautiously. Levi tried to maintain silence as they drew nearer, as the killer came through the door.

It all happened so fast he wouldn’t quite be able to recall it later: the door closed, he pushed himself off the wall and hurtled himself at the silhouette he could make out in the dark, moving too fast to register anything besides a small build and white hair. The gun cracked

down first, but barely made contact; the killer was fast and seemed to have anticipated him being there, ducking away and swinging out a foot to catch him in the leg. Levi grunted and swung out with his arms, grabbing at the killer to bring him down. He landed hard on his knee just as a rock-hard fist connected with his ear. The sound that came from Levi then was almost inhuman; he pushed the killer to the floor and brought the butt of his gun down so hard that it splintered the wood where it landed.

He'd missed.

A piercing sound filled the air around him and Levi couldn't be sure if it was coming from him, the killer, or from the injury to his ear. He didn't care, he roared, he brought a fist down and finally made impact, the wet sound of fist and cheek the only thing that mattered in his mind for one lucid moment until a searing, white-hot flash of pain smashed down and radiated through his left leg. He looked down and found himself staring at a knife buried to the hilt in the muscle of his thigh. The momentary pause was enough, the killer pushed him aside and struggled to stand. Before they could get away, he managed to grab their arms, using the forward momentum to bring his head crashing into their gut. Gasping for air, the killer stumbled away, giving Levi a moment to try and stand. He winced with the pain in his leg as he pushed himself up, but he was too slow; the killer grabbed a cast-iron lamp off the side table and spun toward him. Levi rose up, swinging forward with outstretched arms just as the killer brought the lamp crashing down on his head.

A light burst behind his eyes. A searing pain following as he felt himself collapse into an utter, inky darkness.

## Chapter End Notes

Lake Peigneur is, in fact, a saltwater lake. In 1980, Exxon was drilling in the lake for oil. It was an 11 ft. deep lake that happened to be over a salt mine. Exxon essentially punched a hole in the bottom, and the entire lake turned into a swirling vortex, taking down oil rigs, boats....everything. the water from the lake filled up the salt mine, and then sucked down water from the deltas, changed the entire pH and ecosystem of the lake. It's now 1300 feet deep.

I picked it randomly when I wrote the last chapter based on it's proximity to the other murder, and then discovered all this when I googled it. It's quite fascinating!!

KJDSFHKJD this amazing person [the-young-wolf-king](#) made a gorgeous comic-style fanart of this chapter! It's [here](#) if you want to see it!!!

# The Damn Long Night

## Chapter Summary

“Gentlemen,” Erwin offered them in greeting, “Meet our murderer.”

## Chapter Notes

Almost vaguely fluffy for a few seconds if you squint. :3

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

Erwin heard a gutting scream just as he pushed through the trees and into a clearing. His eyes lit first on the cabin, the unmistakable sounds of a struggle drawing his feet before his mind had a chance to process what might be happening. Gun drawn, he ran up the stairs and through the door, crashing into the cabin just in time to see a white-haired figure holding something above a crumpled form on the floor. The figure broke their coup-de-grace pose and turned toward him, hissing like an animal. Erwin leveled his gun and barked out a quick, “Police! Drop your weapon or I *will* shoot!”

A moment of silence, and then faster than he could have expected the figure was moving toward him, some dark slickness covering their mouth and giving them the look of a monster. It didn’t occur to him that she was girl until he was bringing his gun across her cheek. The impact hurled her into the wall and Erwin was on her immediately, grabbing at her arms and slamming her into the hardened wood of the wall again for good measure. Her shrieks were becoming deafening but Erwin managed to get her in cuffs, his own voice rising above her as he yelled, again and again, for her to shut the fuck up.

Finally, exasperated, he hauled back and hit her with an open palm, realizing after he’d done so that her face, and now his palm, was covered in slick blood. “God damnit ya idiot fuckin’ shitcunt whore motherfucker,” he hissed, his breath coming in heaves. “Shut yer stupid cocksucker or I’ll give ya somethin’ ta scream about, ya dumb fuckin’ piss-drinkin’ pile a shit. *Fuck.*”

Whether it was his tone, his words, or the slap, the girl stopped fighting, stopped screaming. Instead, she began to rock back and forth quickly, muttering things to herself that Erwin

couldn't be bothered to even try to understand. Huffing out a breath, he dragged her over to Levi's unconscious form, unwilling to let her out of his sight for even a moment.

Carefully, he reached his bloodstained fingers down to take Levi's pulse. He was relieved to find it beating against his fingers, stronger and faster than he could have expected or imagined. Erwin knew that he needed to somehow get both Levi and this psycho bitch back to the car without losing either of them. How he was going to explain this one to the chief... well, he could figure that out later.

"God damn you," he muttered at Levi's unconscious form as he pushed himself up and found a kerosene lamp. "Hey, mumbles, I'm gonna light this lamp, an' if ya so much 's move, I'm gonna blow yer fuckin' head off. Yeah?" She nodded, her muttering never ceasing. "Good," he replied, letting go of her cuffs long enough to light a match from the book in his pocket and get the wick of the lamp going. In the yellow halo of lamplight, a few things became immediately clear; they were not alone in this cabin, and though Levi had acted like a damn fool, he'd not been wrong.

Erwin grabbed the girl's cuffs and dragged her over to the corpse of someone he could only imagine was the original owner of the cabin. He was a middle-aged male, balding, a generous beer belly stretching his bloodstained shirt. He'd been stabbed near a hundred times. Erwin wasn't an expert, but he imagined the man hadn't been dead for more than a few hours.

"Yer skinny ass did that?" he asked her, frowning. She bit her lips, and Erwin sighed, holding the lamp up to her face. He nearly recoiled in horror; her skin was eerily pale, blisters covering her cheeks and bubbling off bloodied lips whose movement never ceased. It seemed that a few of her blisters had broken open, the clear pus mingling with the blood on her chin. Her cheeks were hollow, eyes red-rimmed and sunken. Her hair was long, white, and brittle, her eyebrows half ripped-out on each side. She was wearing boxer shorts that hung low on her hips and a white tank top, her ribs heaving under her shirt as she muttered and muttered. Erwin sighed and clenched his teeth.

"Yer gonna need some fuckin' shoes," he spat on the floor. "Though I'll admit I'd rather jus' make ya walk through them woods with no shoes on at all, ya want that?"

She shook her head fervently. Across the room, Levi groaned and stirred.

"It'd make mah life a hell of a lot easier if you'd jus' wake tha fuck up," Erwin called over. Levi moaned again and brought his hand up to rub at his head. "Don' move yet neither, ya got a knife in yer leg."

Erwin tugged the girl along with one hand and held the lantern up with the other. The cabin was small, and the bedroom didn't even have a door on it's hinges. Erwin pushed the girl through first, the lantern bathing the room in circles of buttery light. "Git on yer knees," he said, his tone firm. She obeyed, but her mumbling got louder as Erwin lifted the cuffs up, forcing her torso forward and her head down. "There," he muttered, setting the lantern on the floor and surveying the closet. There were several pairs of worn down boots and a basket of socks; Erwin grabbed the two smallest-looking pairs—one for the girl, one for Levi—dropped them in the basket of socks, and made his way back out to the living room with his prisoner before him.

Levi was sitting up and rubbing his head blearily. “Nice timin’,” he croaked.

“No thanks ta yer dumb ass, I reckon.”

“Yeah,” was all Levi said, and Erwin felt slightly vindicated.

“Well, now we got this crazy bitch an’ at least a mile hike through them woods, an’ yer leg’s got a knife in it, an she ain’t got no shoes.”

“But we *did* catch ‘er, didn’ we?”

“That we did,” Erwin admitted. “But ya fuckin’ owe me one.”

Levi nodded and tried to push himself up off the floor, but Erwin yelled for him to stop so loud that the girl jumped six inches straight in the air. “Sit yer ass down ’n apply pressure aroun’ tha wound. Do *not* move, and don’t take out tha fuckin’ knife.”

“Ya know, Smith, this ain’t the firs’ time I been stabbed.”

“I don’t give a fuck if ya been stabbed a hunnerd times. Lemme get shoes on this crazy cunt an’ then I’ll worry about you, got it?”

“Jesus Christ,” Levi grumbled, but with the state Erwin was in, he didn’t figure he had much room to argue.

Erwin sat the girl down on the couch and started putting socks over her blistered feet. In another situation, he might have pitied her, but after seeing the owner of the cabin, he didn’t really have a single solitary shit to give. When he had about four socks on each foot, he shoved her feet into the boots. They were still too big, but it was the best he could do.

“Alright. Think ya can get these boots on yer feet?”

“I reckon I can,” Levi replied, taking the boots from Erwin and wincing as he moved his leg.

“Careful,” Erwin hissed, earning himself a spiteful eye roll.

“I’ll support ya, but it’s gonna be at least a mile back ta tha road, an’ with the underbrush n’all...”

“Don’ be a fuckin’ moron,” Levi groaned. “Ya think our vic over there don’ have no transportation?”

Erwin was stunned that he hadn’t thought of it. “I s’pose ‘e prob’ly does...”

“Damn right. Tie ‘er up ’n stick ‘er in tha trunk. I ain’t walkin’ through no underbrush with a damn knife in mah thigh, an’ I don’ figger he’s in any state ta care if we borrow ‘is car.”

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As it turned out, the victim owned an old brown Chevy truck and a healthy amount of utility rope. At Levi's insistence, Erwin put a blanket in the truck bed before depositing the girl there. He'd tied her down as securely as he could, but insisted that Levi drive so he could stay in the back with her; he wasn't prepared to take any chances. Luckily, Levi knew how to drive a stick. Unfortunately, using his bad leg for the clutch was a necessity. With nothing else to be done, Erwin grabbed a washcloth for Levi to bite as they drove. It was still better than walking.

The drive back to the car was fifteen minutes of bumps and Levi's loud cursing—apparently he'd tossed his washcloth early on in favor of verbalizing his pain. The journey left Erwin grateful for the blanket and with a series of bruises he hadn't really thought to expect. When he finally clambered out of the truck his joints were creaking in a way that made him feel far too old.

Depositing their still-bound killer into the backseat of the car was followed by helping Levi into the passenger side. Finally, Erwin radioed headquarters.

He rattled off his call numbers and the codes for having the murderer in custody. The incredulous squawks of response were not unexpected, but they left Erwin with a grimace. He could already hear Pixis mixing admonishments with disbelief, and though he would have loved to pin the whole thing on Levi, he couldn't sell his partner out like that...even if he damn well deserved it.

Levi, for his part, smoked quietly in the front seat.

"Ya know we're gonna have ta get ya ta tha hospital, right?" Erwin asked, looking over at the fresh blood on Levi's pant leg, a product of the drive.

"I don' wanna go."

"Wha'tha fuck you mean you don' wanna go?"

"Jus' that 's all. I don' wanna go."

"Well, yer gonna have ta put on yer big boy pants an' get over it."

"Nah."

"'Nah' ain't a fuckin' option, Levi."

"Look, Smith, I can take care'a mah own shit. I don' need a fuckin' hospital. I don' do too well in 'em anyhow."

"An' I don' do to well rescuin' yer skinny ass from crazy bitches but here we are. It's the leas' ya can fuckin' do after what ya'll put me through t'night."

The night enveloped the car as they drove, Levi sucking down cigarette after cigarette as Erwin tried to piece together what had happened, the mumbling from the back seat an ever-present backing track to this whole absurd adventure. Finally, he asked, "Ya really think this skinny fucker done killed them prosts? I mean they were beat to *hell* when we found 'em."



“She got tha’ better’a me, didn’ she?” Levi tossed back, one brow raised.

“I s’pose she did.”

“Might also have somethin’ ta do wi’ the drugs...”

“What drugs?”

“First vic was high as a fuckin’ kite. I’m bettin’ tha nex’ one will be too. An uh...I don’ think Miss Chatterbox back there is any kinda sober.”

“Meth?”

“Maybe, maybe somethin’ else.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno, she ain’t pissed in a damn cup yet, has she?”

“Don’ get yer blood pressure up or nothin’, Jesus,” Erwin frowned at the road. He was driving as fast as he thought he could, lights flashing, but Lafayette was at least another fifteen minutes away and he couldn’t afford to let Levi fall asleep on the way.

“What’r we gonna say ‘bout this?” Levi groaned.

“We’re gonna say ya had a hunch an’ I thought you were wrong. So we wen’ on lookin’ but I didn’ think ta bring any backup. An then we foun’ the cabin an’ the girl got a jump on us.”

“Why not jus’ say I wen’ off on my own?”

“I think tha’s pretty obvious.” Erwin said quietly.

Levi was glad for the darkness in the car as he bit his lips to stop a smirk. Any other time, he might have hassled Erwin for being soft, might have ribbed him about caring, but not tonight. The tone of his voice, stripped of all bravado, the way he didn’t even question whether or not he would be lying on Levi’s behalf, the way he was willing to take the fall equally, knowing that was the difference between Levi’s suspension and his remaining on the force...it settled warm in his gut, like Irish coffee on a cold winter night.

Ten minutes later they were pulling into the station, Erwin all but commanding Levi to stay put while he took their perp inside. He insisted against Levi’s protestation that they could interrogate her in the morning.

He swung through the door with the girl before him, his expression grim as the officers on duty caught sight of her, their eyes shooting wide. In the harsh fluorescent light, Erwin couldn’t blame them. Her pale skin was splotchy and covered in sores, her mouth and nose bathed in sticky, drying blood, her frizzy hair bleached white, though the dark brown roots pushed through. Her eyes were big and an other-worldly shade of blue, her knuckles split, the blisters around her lips utterly repulsive. And still, even now, she mumbled nonsense syllables under her breath in a low-pitched whine.

“Gentlemen,” Erwin offered them in greeting, “Meet our murderer.”

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Erwin lost track of how many promises he made to the officers on duty—that he would come back, that he would fill out the mountain of paperwork this shit would require, that he would tell them the whole story, on and on and on. He got a few promises in return, however, namely that they would keep a tighter watch on that girl that they did on their own balls. He told them to implement suicide watch protocol, and to keep the camera on her if possible.

“She don’ shut up,” he said, “But if ya hear somethin’ sounds like English? Write that shit down.”

He didn’t know why, but she felt like a spirit, a specter that would disappear the minute that his eyes were off of her.

Finally, he was dropping back into the car. The dome light came on as the door opened, illuminating Levi in shades of yellow. Even in that forgiving light, Erwin could see his lips going pale.

“Yep, sorry, yer goin’ to tha hospital.”

“Smith, ‘m serious now, I can’t. Don’ take me.”

“Would ya feel better if I got Jackie there? She’s a nurse, ya know.”

“I know, she tol’ me.”

“Well, will ya go if she can tend to ya?”

“Why can’ she jus’ ...tend to me at yer house?”

Erwin scoffed. “Are you fuckin’ jokin’? You want my girls seein’ you bleedin’ all over tha kitchen table?”

Levi was quiet, his jaw clenched in pain.

“Look, she’s an RN, an’ she can probably fix ya on up without a doctor. But ya gotta get some antibiotics an’ ya gotta get checked out.”

“Fine,” Levi muttered quietly, and Erwin breathed a sigh of relief.

Ten minutes later, Erwin was pulling into the hospital and running inside to call Jackie. She answered, her voice thick with sleep.

“I’m sorry, baby, but you gotta come up ta tha hospital,” Erwin said.

“Are ya hurt?” she asked, panic laced through her voice.

“Nah, but Levi is. He decided ta take his fool ass on ’n adventure an got ‘imself a knife in the thigh. He don’t want anyone ta touch ‘im but you.”

Jackie seemed to understand immediately, confirming she would be there soon and hanging up without so much as a question. That settled, Erwin borrowed a wheelchair and wheeled it out to the car.

“Ya gotta be kiddin’ me wi’ that shit,” Levi sneered, eying the chair as though it were a torture device created solely for him.

“Levi, ya need ta stop walkin’ on it until Jackie gets a look at it.”

Levi lapsed into stony silence and refused to get out of the car, so Erwin sat in the chair and wheeled about in circles until he saw Jackie’s Camry pull up into the drive. She hopped out of the car, dressed in light blue scrubs, her hair pulled back into a messy bun. Erwin grimaced and nodded toward the door.

“The princess awaits,” he offered.

“Shut the fuck up,” Levi countered, and Jackie shook her head.

She dropped a kiss on Erwin’s forehead and motioned for him to get out of the chair before leaning down at the car window.

“All right, killer, lemme see that leg.”

Levi flipped on the dome light, and Jackie nodded, all business. “Alright, lemme get ya inside. Erwin’s right about the chair. An’ yer gonna have ta see a doctor, but I’ll be righ’ there with ya.”

With a defeated sigh, Levi shrugged. “Fine,” was the only word he uttered. Erwin couldn’t decide if he was relieved or worried to see the fire go out of his partner that way, but decided that ultimately it was for the better. A few minutes later they had him in a hospital room, Jackie taking a pair of safety scissors to his slacks.

“Hope ya aren’t gonna miss these,” she said with a smile.

“Nah,” Levi said, stone-faced and grim. “D’ya...have ta cut all the way up?”

“Never took ya for a modest type,” Jackie said with a smile, but when she caught Levi’s gaze, her smile fell. There was something there that she recognized, part desperation, part fear.

“Yeah, I do honey, I’m sorry. But I wont cut through anythin’ else, alright?”

Levi nodded, lips sealed tight.

He let himself be put on an IV with painkillers, let the doctor examine the head wound and the knife, but when the doctor suggested removing it in a surgical theatre, he balked. “No. Take it out here.”

“Levi,” Jackie said gently, “It’s safer in the surgery. And cleaner.”

“I don’t *give a fuck*” Levi hissed, his hands fisting in the hospital sheets. “Take it out here and send me the fuck home.”

Jackie raised a brow at him, but he scowled in return. “Fine, but yer gonna have to sign a liability form. An’ I wouldn’ be lettin’ you get away with this if ya weren’ a friend, so you owe me one.”

“Seems I owe somethin’ ta tha whole damn Smith family after t’night,” Levi grumbled. Jackie nodded.

“Seems ya do.”

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Levi was lucky that the knife was small and had been stabbed in the muscle; it would heal soon enough with rest and antibiotics. With the knife finally removed, the wound cleaned and bandaged, a solid round of the strongest antibiotics the hospital had and a loaner pair of scrub pants, Levi was finally allowed to leave. Jackie returned to the girls, the fatigue finally starting to show on her face around three in the morning. Erwin drove Levi home.

“Mah truck’s still at the station,” Levi muttered, drowsy from the painkillers and overall exhausted from the events of the evening.

“Yeah well. I can take ya to the station t’morrow if ya feel like comin’ in.”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me? Of course I’m comin’ in. If ya think that yer gonna interrogate that crazy fuck without me, ya gotta be fuckin’ stupid.”

Erwin chuckled and shook his head.

“I wouldn’ dream of it.”

“Good.” Levi muttered, settling down into the seat. They drove along, Levi giving directions to his apartment when they were necessary. When they arrived, Levi pushed himself up out of the seat before Erwin could even try to help him. Erwin rolled his eyes. “Ya need help,” he insisted, eying Levi’s stairs.

“Fine, fine,” Levi assented, lacking the fire he needed to protest. Hesitantly, he looped his arm through Erwin’s and let his weight sink against him. He was so light, Erwin knew he could have carried him easily, but it would have been far too much of a blow to Levi’s ego. So he simply walked slowly, letting Levi press his scant weight against him, grasping at him a little tighter as they made their way up the stairs.

Levi fumbled with his keys and finally produced them, unlocking the door. Erwin helped him inside, surveying the apartment in spite of himself. It was clean enough, he supposed, but empty...like no one lived there at all. Levi swallowed and cleared his throat. “You can go,” he said, his voice rough. “I reckon’ you stuck yer nose in mah business enough fer one day.”

Erwin's eye was drawn by the shard of mirror on the wall, his gaze locking on it until Levi began extricating his arm and pulling away from Erwin's grasp.

"Sorry, but I don't think you should be alone right now," Erwin said, meeting Levi's scowl with a small smile. "Jacks says you have a concussion."

"What'd ya figger, we were gonna have some kind a slumber party?" Levi grouched, limping over to his fridge. "Anyway they said it's mild. Ain't nothin' I never had before."

Erwin frowned as he leaned forward, peered into the so-called living room. "You live here?" he asked, eying the stacks of boxes, the crucifix on the wall, the mattress on the floor.

"Sure do, now will ya fuckin' leave, please, shit head? This ain't yer nightly entertainment, ya know."

"Nah I've had plenty a' that t'night, thanks ta you," Erwin scoffed. "You don't got a bedroom in this place?"

"It's on the secon' floor," Levi muttered, scowling mightily. "But I don't like it."

"I suppose not," Erwin shot back, shaking his head.

"What'r all them books for?"

"They're crime books. You know, fer work? Jus' get the fuck out, Erwin, I need ta sleep."

"Alright, but I gotta wake ya up every two hours."

"Did ya trick me into lettin' you help me jus' ta weasel yer way inta' stayin' here tonight?"

"I promised Jacks I wouldn't let ya be a moron."

"I shoulda fuckin' known." Levi sighed, sagging against the kitchen counter. "Meddlin' shits."

"Sorry we didn't want ya dead. Maybe someday you'll start givin' a damn about yer life an' we wont have to mother hen ya anymore. But today don't appear to be that day."

"Well, yer gonna have a hell of a time. I don't have a couch'r nothin'.

"I should'a seen that coming," Erwin sighed, "It's alright, though, I'll jus' bed down on tha floor."

"Suit yerself," Levi sighed, clearly too exhausted to argue. "I jus' gotta sleep."

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The first time the alarm rang, Erwin stumbled up from his blankets with a start, not remembering quite where he was. It came to him in slow waves. He was at Levi's house. He had to check on him because...because they'd caught their killer. Levi had nearly died in the

pursuit. They'd been asleep for two hours. Erwin had to check Levi for responsiveness the way Jacks had told him to.

With a groan, he made his way over to the side of Levi's bed, which consisted solely of a mattress on the floor, and shook him gently.

"Wake up, now," he muttered in the pre-dawn gloom, "Jus' fer a minute, Levi."

"Hnnng," Levi groaned unhelpfully.

"Tell me yer name, please," Erwin asked patiently.

"Fuckoff."

"Nah, that ain't good enough, tell me yer name."

"Levi."

"Can ya open yer eyes?" Erwin asked with a yawn.

Levi did, and though they were mightily bloodshot, the pupils matched, and they followed Erwin's finger without a problem.

"Now lemme sleep," Levi muttered, and Erwin nodded.

He only hesitated for a moment, his eyes lighting on Levi's brow, his lips, the hair that brushed the fine lines of his cheekbone. He swallowed.

"Ya wanna cuddle'r sumthin," Levi slurred. Erwin frowned.

"Nah, but the floor ain't that comfortable."

"You wanted'a stay didn't ya."

"Yep. Go to sleep." And with that, he crawled over to the blankets and settled back down.

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Erwin finally got up around eight thirty, every bone in his body exhausted. He'd woken Levi up one other time throughout the night, but it wasn't as though they even had that long to sleep. He'd wake him again around nine thirty if he hadn't woken up on his own.

Yawning, he ambled to the kitchen in search of coffee or food. He should have known better than to expect such accommodations; the fridge had four twelve-packs of soda, a bottle of spicy mustard and an expired carton of milk. Aside from a few packets of ramen noodles, there was nothing else in the house to eat. Erwin figured he could make a run for food and coffee, but should get a little cleaned up first. There was a small bathroom downstairs, but he didn't want to wake Levi, so he went upstairs and poked around the empty rooms until he came across a bathroom.

It was the only room in the place that was well-appointed, a variety of soaps laid out neatly on a shelf above the toilet, at least ten different cleaners under the sink, three kinds of mouthwash and two different toothpastes, and the shower was practically overflowing with products of all kinds. Erwin hadn't brought a toothbrush, so he just used some toothpaste and a finger. He took his time washing his face, combing his hair, and even found an electric shaver to run over his face. Feeling at least somewhat presentable, he started to go, but something caught his eye. The closet in the corner was open just a hair, and inside...well, he needed to look closer.

With an illicit sort of thrill he slipped his fingers around the edge of the door and then, in one swift movement, swung it open.

Syringes. Hundreds of them. Erwin's eyes went wide.

"Havin' fun snoopin' on me?" Levi drawled in the doorway. Erwin nearly jumped out of his skin.

"I-..." he started, but Levi waved his hand and pushed his way into the bathroom.

"I know exactly what yer doin' so don't fuckin' bother. Now get outta here, I gotta take a piss."

Erwin was far too stunned to say anything, opting instead to slink out of the bathroom like a dog who'd been smacked with a newspaper. He stopped outside the door, sighing as it slammed behind him. He couldn't hide that he'd been snooping, not now, which left him wondering if he should just go ahead and ask what he wanted to know. He knew that Levi had a past in Narco and, well, officers in Narco usually ended up addicted to one thing or another, especially if they were undercover. Technically, he had a responsibility to report Levi, but he wasn't the type of man to report his partner unless it became absolutely necessary. Levi didn't have the rank or the prestige that Erwin enjoyed, and a black mark like that could have him pushing paper for years, or worse, ejected from the department. Erwin had seen enough of his partner in action to know that he needed the job just as much as it needed him.

But if he wasn't going to report him or have him tested, didn't he at least deserve some explanation? It was a matter of safety, really, his own and that of others. Being intoxicated on the job could lead to harm to them both, to a civilian, even to a perp or a witness. Some part of Erwin twinged, but he ignored it. He had seen the syringes. It wouldn't be right to simply ignore them.

The door opened and Levi pushed past him, making his way down the stairs. "I hope ya ain't plannin' ta ask about it," he said just as Erwin opened his mouth to speak.

Erwin followed him down the stairs and around the corner, his gut clenching uncomfortably. "Look, Levi, I jus'..."

"You jus' came into my house under tha pretense'a helpin' me an' then, when ya thought I was sleepin', decided ta help yourself ta my business."

“C’mon, now, helpin’ you weren’t no pretense,” Erwin huffed, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorframe as Levi limped around gathering up fresh clothes. “Levi, I’m sorry, I got curious, but I gotta be honest...”

“What, now ya want me ta pee in a cup? Erwin, the syringes were obtained legally for a legal purpose. Ya need ta know anythin’ else?”

“What, ya got....diabetes or somethin’? How come I ain’t never seen ya injectin’?”

“Yes, dumbass, diabetes is tha only possible thing anyone’d ever have sharps for.”

“Well then what’r they for? You wouldn’t let ‘em do a blood test las’ night, what kinda conclusion are ya expectin’ me ta draw, here, Levi?”

“I was,” Levi swiped a shirt off the back of a chair, wincing as his weight fell on his left leg, “Expectin’ ya’d respect me ‘nough’ta at *least* stay the fuck outta my business. I gotta change. Turn yer fuckin’ back.”

Erwin’s brow arched at the request, but he complied regardless. Levi hadn’t struck him as the type who was much concerned about men looking at him, but Queer Fear ran deep in these parts and he was used to it. With his back to Levi, now, Erwin sighed. “Look, it ain’t that I don’t respect ya, Levi, but you were in Narco. If you didn’t have somethin’ ta be addicted to, you’d be quite a fuckin’ exception.

“Never said I didn’t, but I ain’t usin’ the needles fer drugs. Ya don’t need ta know anything else.”

“Levi, I’m yer partner, if ya got some kinda condition I really need ta know about it...”

His words caught on the edge of his tongue as he was swung around, rough, Levi’s fingers digging into his arm so hard it made his breath catch in his throat. His gaze found Levi’s gunmetal eyes, his anger palpable as he stared up at Erwin, jaw clenched. Erwin returned the stare with a question in his gaze, his head tilting slightly.

“God damnit, Smith,” Levi hissed. “If yer gonna be so fuckin’ nosey...I jus’...don’t make the right hormones, okay? So I gotta inject ‘em instead.”

Erwin stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. “I don’t see why that was such a fuckin’ big deal. I gotta bad knee from playin’ football in high school an high blood pressure runs in tha family. We even?”

“No, we ain’t fuckin’ *even*, Smith. Jus’...drop it.” Levi let go of his arm, and wheeled away into the kitchen, limping toward the door. Erwin sighed, rubbed a hand over his face, and followed.

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Half an hour later, armed with a drive-thru breakfast and the biggest coffees they could find, Erwin and Levi walked into the station. As they came through the door, Levi limping behind slightly, the room exploded in a spirited round of applause. Levi looked around in wonder, his



eyes widening as he caught Brenda's gaze, and...was she *crying*? He let himself be enveloped into a hug.

"Oh god, honey, I couldn' believe it when they told me, I'm jus' glad yer okay," She said, wiping at her eyes.

"I'm fine," Levi muttered, looking at the floor. "I'm really fine."

Erwin was getting clapped on the back by Mike and Nile, who were hounding him for details as Nanaba looked on with a smile. This went on until a voice boomed over the commotion.

"Smith! Levi! Git on in here, now, I think we got some things ta discuss." Pixis said, leaning in the doorframe of his office. Erwin and Levi exchanged a look before making their way over, each of them the picture of reluctance. They went into the office, Levi closing the door behind them before they settled into the chairs in front of Pixis' desk.

He looked them both over for a moment, a small, perpetual smile so frozen on his lips that Levi had to assume his face had just wrinkled that way, and he wasn't smiling at all. Finally, he spoke.

"Techs've been crawlin' all over that cabin in tha woods an they sayin' they already got enough evidence ta put yer suspect away fer life."

Erwin shot Levi a look, and Levi raised his brows slightly.

"Trouble is, she's fuckin' insane an' it ain't gonna take long fer tha state ta send a case worker. When they get here, yer time is up, so yer gonna have'ta hurry if ya think ya can get anythin' outta her 'sides that yammerin' she done all night." He sighed, pursing his lips together.

"That said, I'm sure ya'll got quite a fuckin' story fer me an' I'm anxious ta hear it, but there's somethin' else I think ya'll might'a missed," Pixis paused, watching Erwin and then Levi, as though waiting for them to guess.

"What might that'a been?" Erwin finally asked, unsure.

"I'll tell ya, but don' get excited 'r nuthin', it migh' jus' be a coincidence."

"Yeah?" Levi prompted, his fingers itching for a cigarette. "What is it?"

"Remember tha shit tha Guiterrez boy was covered in?" he asked, waiting for their nods before he continued, "Well, she's gotta whole bag a'tha stuff. Foun' it in tha cabin, shoplifted a couple'a days ago in Erath."

"But that bitch's white as a fuckin' sheet..." Erwin puzzled, titled his head to the side. "You seriously think..."

"Wonder if she's always been tha' way," Levi leaned forward, his eyes alight.

"It might be nothin'," Pixes reiterated, but Levi scoffed.

“Nah, it ain’t. It ain’t nothin’. C’mon, Smith, we got ourselves a suspect ta’ interro-gate.”

# Ibis

## Chapter Summary

“Hey,” Erwin shook him slightly, his tone between a growl and whisper. “What the fuck didya think you were doin’ in there?”

“An interrogation, Smith, what’d it look like?” Levi twisted away from him, and Erwin released his arm, though he still loomed large above him.

“It looked like a god damn clusterfuck is what it looked like.”

## Chapter Notes

Meet the lady of the hour...

We have new fanart!!!! This amazing person [the-young-wolf-king](#) made a gorgeous comic-style fanart of chapter 5! It's [here](#) if you want to see it!!! Thank you, dear one! And thank you for tagging so I could find it :3!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

The interrogation room was a plain affair, as always. Levi sat in his plastic chair with an air of such utter nonchalance that he seemed to be having coffee with an old friend. Their suspect—still “Jane Doe”, still unidentified—was seated across from him, a styrofoam cup of water sitting untouched before her.

The blood that had coated her face had been washed away, though that feat, along with her medical examination, had only been accomplished under full-body restraints. They had taken blood samples and made detailed records of her injuries. Though her muttering had continued throughout the night, she was quiet now, chewing at the chap on her lips, sapphire eyes slipping up to Levi and landing across his face erratically. She glanced at his chin, his hair, his forehead, his nose, his jaw; everywhere but his eyes. The two of them sat there in pregnant silence, the girl playing with her hands and Levi sipping coffee calmly. Erwin watched from the corner, stony and imposing, playing out the prescriptions of his role.

Levi finished his drink, stood up, stretched, and limped over to the trashcan. He stepped outside, murmured to an officer quietly, then came back and sat down. Erwin watched him settle in, his hands clasped on the steel table, leaning ever so slightly closer to the girl, his body loose, relaxed. A few minutes later the door opened, the officer setting a banker's box on the table, nodding to Levi, then stepping outside again. Levi inhaled deeply and fixed his gaze on the girl who would have been his killer just twelve hours earlier.

"Mornin'," he finally drawled, pulling a cigarette out of his pocket. "You smoke, *Jane*?" She nodded. "Well alright."

He lit a cigarette for her and handed it to her; she held it daintily, clasped between her finger and thumb. By the time they were both smoking, Erwin noticed the tension in her shoulders slackening up a little. He didn't smile, but felt a warmth in his gut all the same. Levi had her unravelling already, even before they'd spoken; it was a sight to behold.

"Now, I know ya tried to kill me las' night," Levi started. She giggled, he grimaced.

"An' that was kinda understandable, seein' as I came outta tha dark an' attacked ya. I can't blame ya. But, let's leave tha past in tha past, alright? Why don'cha tell me what ya were doin' in tha cabin, huh?"

The girl smoked her cigarette, absently tracing spirals on the tabletop as her eyes flicked between Erwin and Levi anxiously. Levi took a deep drag and blew the smoke out in a thin stream, then clucked his tongue. "You don' wanna talk abou' tha cabin? Alright. I ain't gonna be unreasonable, now. Seems ya got...a lil' issue, there, right round yer mouth? Them blisters look painful, Jane, where'd they come from?"

She shifted in her seat, pulling the smoke from her cigarette into her mouth before pushing it out and inhaling with her nose. Watching it made Erwin's sinuses ache, but she just sat there, eyes darting about nervously. Levi was quiet, following his gut; he could almost see the words bubbling beneath her surface, ready to come forth. Sometimes silence was the best interrogator.

Sure enough, less than a minute passed before she was leaning forward and murmuring. Levi mirrored her, leaning forward and raising a brow.

"What was that?" he asked, "I didn' hear ya, try again."

Her voice was soft and rough, barely above a whisper but this time Erwin could make out her muttering the same word again and again. *Ibis*.

"Ibis?" he asked, tilting his head to the side. "That yer name or sumthin'?"

"Ibis," she whispered again and again, "Ibis, Ibis, Ibis, Ibis."

"Alright, fine, Ibis. Nice ta meet ya. I'm detective Levi, an this is my partner, Erwin. See Erwin, he's the boss, an' that's why he took ya down so easy las' night." Levi looked back at Erwin, then offered Ibis something suspiciously like a smile. "So we're all gonna play nice an' get along, alright?"

“Ibis,” she whispered. Levi nodded.

“Okay then, Ibis. Let’s talk about some ‘a this I got here in my box, huh? How about...” he lifted the lid from the box and rummaged through it as if he didn’t know precisely what he was looking for. “How about...this?”

He pulled a plastic evidence bag out of the box and placed it before her on the table. It contained the clay man from the first crime scene, his enormous genitals intact, dopey grin on his face. “Now, Ibis, I know ya like ta leave these with tha girls. Why don’ ya...talk to me a little bit about this?”

Ibis traced spirals into the blank steel surface of the table, her eyes darting now between the clay man and Levi, still avoiding his eyes with every glance. “The author’s own life was ruined by his art,” she whispered softly. Slowly, she began to rock back and forth. “Aren’t they funny? Aren’t they funny? Aren’t they funny?” As she spoke, her voice altered in pitch and volume, almost as though she were singing instead of speaking. “Aren’t they funny? Levi, Levi, Levi, Ibis, Levi. Aren’t they funny?”

“Hilarious,” Levi muttered, face impassive. “Ibis, wha’ did ya do ta get such pretty white skin, huh?”

“What,” she half sang, “Lies between the wolf and sheep? She lies with the sheep, the sheep, Ibis.”

Levi reached into the box, pulling out the other clay man in his evidence bag, the impressions of the victims teeth immortalized in his belly.

“What abou’ this one, Ibis? Yer girl nearly bit ‘im in half. Tha’s what happens, ya see, when ya die...yer jaw locks up.” Levi snapped his teeth together, one slender finger landing on the evidence bag. “Did ya know he would get bit in half when ya left ‘im there?”

“I can do no wrong,” she half-sang in that strange, lilting tone, her eyes finally fixing on Levi’s. “I can do no wrong, I can do no wrong, Levi, I do not know what wrong is.”

“How interestin’,” Levi said, “How’d ya get yer hair so pretty an’ white too, Ibis?”

“Angels an’ devils, Ibis, Levi, gotta wash the devil off your skin, Levi, Levi, Levi.”

“Lil’ Andrew had ta wash them devil off ‘is skin too, didn’ he?”

For a moment, she just stared at him, worrying her lips between her teeth and rocking, forward and backward over and over like some patient in an institution. Levi waited, patient, lighting up another cigarette, taking note of the tremor in her hand. “No one will pity you,” she sang softly, “No one will pity you, Ibis, you may always be pitiful, but no one will pity you.”

Her rocking intensified, and Levi pursed his lips. “Were you sparin’ ‘im, Ibis? Keepin’ him from bad men? You know all about them bad men, don’t ya, Ibis?”

“Birds pick at my limbs, birds pick at my limbs, Levi, songbirds, little songbirds, Ibis, Aren’t they funny? Aren’t they funny? Aren’t they funny? We are chosen, chosen, little birds, we sing in harmony.”

“Alright,” Levi said, reaching up absently to find his pulse. “Why don’ we talk about Lottie Jenkins?” He slipped the file out of the evidence box, pulling out a stack of photos of the body spread out on the alter. Slowly, he separated them, pushing the ash tray, clay men, and styrofoam cups out of the way until the table was almost completely covered with images of her mutilated corpse. Finally, Levi sat down, retrieved his half-smoked cigarette from the ashtray, and took a long drag.

“Tell me, Ibis, why her?”

Ibis was humming now, rocking as hard as she could.

“Their hooks are buried deep in your bones, in your bones, in your bones,” she sang softly, “Their hooks are buried deep deep deep, in your bones, Ibis, your very bones.”

“Yer one ta talk,” Levi snorted, crushing his cigarette out in the ashtray. “You got the same hooks, don’cha?”

Ibis rocked and rocked, forward and backward, her movement never really ceasing.

“C’mon now, Ibis, don’t clam up on me now, sweetie. You like drugs, yeah? Jus’ like Lottie? An’ I’m guessin’ you weren’t no stranger ta the sex stuff. Was it yer mama? Did she fuck men fer money jus’ like Lottie?”

“I can do no wrong,” she half-sang, “I can’t do no wrong, no wrong, Levi.”

“Yeah, I got it tha firs’ time,” Levi nodded. “Thing is, ya did kill three people, an we got enough evidence ta send ya to the electric chair, so ya migh’ wanna keep that in mind.”

She was quiet then, staring at him with large, watery eyes, a certain fatigue creeping over her features. Levi stared at her, his eyes fixed. They were deadlocked until Levi lit another cigarette and offered it to her. She accepted. From where Erwin stood, it seemed almost like the steps of a dance, well choreographed and known only by the dancers themselves. Levi lit a second cigarette, sucked down a lungful of smoke, blew it out, and leaned back.

“Alright, Ibis,” he said, and Erwin could see the way he was changing his tactic, the way he was closing in, tightening the noose.

“Yer gonna tell me about Lottie, an’ then yer gonna tell me about the other girl, and the man at the cabin.”

She was silent, regarding him with no small measure of skepticism. Then, as if some conclusion had been reached, she began humming quietly and staring down at the photos before her. Levi reached into the banker’s box and pulled out more photos, this time of the second victim — still unidentified — and the woodcarving in the side of the tree.

“What’s the devil doin’ here, Ibis?” Levi asked, pointing to the photo. Ibis stared at it, then reached out with a single finger and slid it across the table until it was before her. With one fingertip, she traced a spiral over it, then sat back and shrugged.

“We sing in harmony.”

“Who do ya sing with, then?” Levi asked, but Ibis was ignoring him, staring off at the wall, humming.

“What about this girl, what’d she do, huh?” Levi asked, “Why were ya tryin’ ta wash ‘er?”

She didn’t offer a response, just stared at the wall, hummed.

“Was she dirty cause’a what she done, Ibis? Or cause you made ‘er dirty?”

Again, nothing. Erwin considered saying something, but Levi had a rhythm to his interrogations, and Erwin didn’t care to disrupt it.

“Ibis, where did you meet her? Was it the same place you met Lottie?”

Ibis stopped humming, stopped and stared down at the picture of Jane Doe, then the picture of Lottie, nodding vaguely. She took in a breath, looked up at Levi and said, “Aren’t they funny?”

Levi brought his hands slamming down on the table so suddenly and with such force that both Erwin and the girl jumped straight up in the air. Before Erwin could intervene, before he could even see what was happening, Levi had the girl pinned against the wall, the crime scene photos scattered about the room, his hand fisted in her shirt as she laughed and laughed.

“Levi!” Erwin yelled out, the door swinging open as the officer outside the room came into intervene.

“C’mon, shitheap!” Levi yelled at her, shoving at her until her head bounced off the concrete wall. “Tell me about Andrew Guterrez! Tell me about Lottie Jenkins! Tell me about that Jane Doe in the water, tell me!”

Erwin grabbed Levi, pulled at him and he let go, raising his hands in the air as the other officer held Ibis in place.

“Calm down, detective,” Erwin said, his voice forceful. “You gotta calm down, now, listen ta me Levi, let’s give it a rest, alrigh’? We can pick this back up later.”

He steered him out of the room, Levi limping ahead of him, tense and trembling. Erwin pushed him into a quiet corner and frowned down at him as Levi crossed his arms, clicked his tongue, and looked pointedly away.

“Hey,” Erwin shook him slightly, his tone between a growl and whisper. “What the fuck didya think you were doin’ in there?”

“An interrogation, Smith, what’d it look like?” Levi twisted away from him, and Erwin released his arm, though he still loomed large above him.

“It looked like a god damn clusterfuck is what it looked like.”

“Well, it fuckin’ was, but that ain’t my fault, Smith. She’s fuckin’ insane.”

“Yeah, thanks, I think we all fig’gered that out by now.”

“We can’t prosecute ‘er,” Levi started, holding up a finger as Erwin began to protest. “She’s insane, she needs a fuckin’ hospital.”

“Yeah, *clearly*, so what the hell are you doin’, gettin’ all ‘bad cop’ in there? Huh? What the fuck was that about?”

“She’s crazy, but she knows somethin’. Knows somethin’ about that Gutierrez boy, knows... who knows, but it’s linked, I fuckin’ swear it.”

“I’ll admit she’s gotta problem, Levi, an’ I’ll admit that whitenin’ cream business is suspicious as fuck, but that don’t mean...”

“Like hell it don’t mean,” Levi cut in, his eyes defiant as Erwin sighed down at him. “Look, I’ve been chasin’ some ghosts surroundin’ this case, an’ I have some...reasons ta think she might know somethin’.”

“Whaddya mean, chasin’ ghosts?” Erwin asked, his features creasing into a deep frown. “You been doin’ some secret agent shit or somethin’? When were ya planning on tellin’ me about this one?”

“Never, if it didn’t turn into nothin’, but...well.”

“‘Well’ is fuckin’ right. You gonna tell me now?”

“I will, but ya gotta let me keep talkin’ to ‘er. Keep the state an’ tha others off’a my back. An’ I need you ta trust me. I need you ta give me a little space.”

“An’ in return for that, I get what?”

“I’ll tell ya what I been up to.”

“That’s a sorry deal, Levi, an’ you know it.”

“Not if this goes as deep as I think it does.”

Erwin breathed, examining Levi’s face, scrutinizing his gaze. Try as he might to deny it, his curiosity was getting the better of him. After last night, he had every reason to suspect that Levi would be doing as he pleased, regardless of Erwin’s involvement. Despite his maverick attitude, he managed to accomplish ends where no one else could. Erwin shook his head, crossed his arms, and fell back against the wall next to Levi. That Levi breathed a little easier



when he wasn't being cornered didn't escape Erwin's notice, but he didn't bring it up. It wasn't the time, nor was it wholly unexpected.

"Alright. You can talk to 'er, but yer gonna explain exactly what's going on tonight, an yer gonna be careful not ta get 'er so riled up she can't talk, we clear?"

"Clear enough," Levi said with a shrug. "Once 'er case worker gets in here, I can guarantee we're gonna lose all access. We can't afford ta wait on this one, Smith, not if we wanna get ta tha heart'a this."

Erwin nodded. "Alrigh'. I'll see if we can hold off the state fer a bit. You go on ahead an' get back in there. I sure hope ya find somethin' useful."

"Thanks, Smith."

"Yeah. Levi?"

"Yeah?"

"If ya put yer hands on 'er again, I'm gonna kick tha shit outta you, injured or not, ya hear?"

Levi shrugged as he walked away. "Ever tha fuckin' white knight," he muttered, but Erwin had already turned toward the offices, and they were running out of time.

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They sat across from one another in the interrogation room, yin and yang separated by the short expanse of a steel table, cigarettes in their hands, an ashtray between them. Levi contemplated the paleness of her, the white hair, patchy pale eyebrows, blistered, powder-white skin and the way it compared to his dark hair, his olive-tinged complexion. People had always told him he was pale, but given a little sun he was all gold and tan, the undertones of which remained even when he'd been holed up with his books and his cigarettes.

He wondered what tone her skin would take if she was exposed to the sun, to the elements, if she wasn't smearing whitening cream on at every opportunity.

*Gotta wash the devil off my skin.*

"Where'd ya come from, Ibis? Where was yer hometown?"

"The Ibis is native to North America," she responded, her tone and accent suddenly neutral, like a textbook.

"Ah, interesting, but I was asking about you, Ibis, not tha bird ibis."

"I'm a little bird, little bird. We sing in harmony."

"Who sings with you?"

“The little birds. All the little marsh birds and the swamp birds and the songbirds, we sing in harmony.”

“Can you teach me your song?” Levi asked, tilting his head slightly. She looked at him, bewildered, raising a brow. “It’s not a difficult question, Ibis. Can you teach me your song?”

“We sing...in harmony,” she replied slowly, unsure.

Levi nodded. “Ibis, when did you meet Lottie Jenkins?”

Ibis gave him a sideways glance, her expression openly suspicious. she took a long drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke out, frowning. “In the halls of Mouth Olympus.”

“What were ya doin’ there?” Levi asked, his words surrounded in a cloud of smoke.

“The muses sing while the gods feast, the muses sing while the gods speak of many things, all the affairs of heaven and of earth. The muses sing.”

“Lottie was a muse?” Levi asked, leaning forward and speaking around his cigarette. Ibis’ nose wrinkled and she looked half-ill.

“Lottie is a whore, just a whore. Their hooks are buried deep in her bones.”

“But Lottie was on Mount Olympus with you. Why?”

Ibis was rocking back and forth now, her cigarette burning lower, forgotten as she rocked and rocked.

The door burst open without warning and a large, middle-aged woman bustled in. Levi crushed his cigarette into the ashtray and stood.

“That will be enough, detective,” the woman gave him a dirty look and a nod toward the door. “Melissa Duhon, Social Services. The state has taken an interest in Jane Doe’s case, and will be providing her with a lawyer immediately. Until such a time as her competence has been evaluated by a professional, you will no longer be allowed to interrogate her.”

“Alright, alright, I’m goin’,” Levi said, raising his hands as he limped to the door slowly. He paused at the door frame, resting a hand there and taking a moment to take the murderer in, perhaps for the last time.

“Go on, detective,” Duhon snapped, waiving him away.

“Yeah alright,” his tone was already flat, bored. “By the way, she goes by Ibis.”

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“Alright,” Pixis cleared his throat as he poured himself three fingers of whiskey. None was offered to Levi or Erwin, though they’d have been stupid to expect it. Levi could feel his fingers itching—he’d fucking *kill* for a drink right now—but he swallowed uselessly at his

dry throat and looked at his hands. There was a scab there he hadn't noticed. Must have come from last night.

"One of ya'll need ta let me know right now why I shouldn't take ya off this. I warned ya it would be touchy, an' here ya are goin' off alone, nearly gettin' killed, an' then roughin' up crazy women in the interrogation room."

"We investigated a lead together," Erwin corrected, "No one wen' off alone. An' Levi didn't behave in any way tha' was different from an average murder interrogation. Tha girl killed three people that we know of, made an attempt on an officer, *my partner* no less, an' ya wanna tell me she deserved tha kid-glove treatment? C'mon, Chief, ya know that's bullshit don'cha?"

Pixis swigged half his whiskey down in a gulp and took a long, hard look at them both. Levi's hand twitched, and he gripped the arm of his chair to stop it. "You boys gotta know this ain't restricted ta this department, right? We got dead prosts in a fuckin' church, ya know. An' not jus' any church..."

"Nichols' church," Levi muttered darkly.

"That why this case 's so touchy?" Erwin smirked, as though he wasn't fully aware.

"Quit bein' a smart-ass, I ain't got tha time fer yer golden-boy bullshit right now, Smith," Pixis warned. "We're one misstep away from gettin' tha en-tire Bible Brigade on up in here an' I ain't overly pleased about it. Right now, ya'll are both a bigger pain in my ass than I cared ta expect so I suggest ya tone it the fuck down."

Levi was brooding, both hands now gripping the arms of his chair. Erwin scrubbed his hand over his face and looked up at Pixis, hoping that they didn't look as hangdog and haggard as he felt.

"Chief," he started carefully, "We caught tha girl an' she's clearly insane. Nichols an' their like'll be seen as tha victims of some crazy bitch'n everybody else's jus' gonna move on. Ain't no reason ta get worked up."

"I hope yer right," Pixis replied, finishing off his drink. "Now get on outta here, take tha rest'a tha day off'n get some fuckin' sleep tonight. Ya both look fuckin' awful."

Levi was mildly surprised that Pixis hadn't asked for any explanation, but then again, between the Bible thumpers putting the screws on and the crazy murderer in the lockup, he imagined that Pixis wasn't particularly keen on more excitement in his life. It was for the better, anyway. Having some extra time to put the details in the paperwork would allow them to make their story rock solid, either way. Considering how touchy this case already seemed to be, the more finessing they could manage, the better.

"Yeah chief," Erwin said with a nod, clapping Levi's shoulder as if to spur him on to action. "C'mon, hoss, let's get a beer. Er...soda. Fer you."

Levi rolled his eyes but rose, limping after Erwin out of the office.

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Erwin cracked open a peanut with his fingers and stared hard at Levi. “When ya gone dry, ain’t ya supposed ta stay that’a’way?”

Levi sat on the other side of a beer and a shot of whiskey, sweat beading up on his brow

“Relapse’s a part a’ recovery,” he said, willing the waver from his voice. “An’ anyway, if ya think I can stay dry after las’ night...after *today*, well. Look Smith, this ain’t no god damn AA meeting and you sure as hell ain’t a priest so jus’ fuckin’ come off it.”

Erwin sighed, taking a ponderous swig off of his own beer. “Well, glad I can bear witness to yer relapse.”

“Yer welcome,” Levi muttered, throwing back the shot with practiced ease. The whiskey burned in that familiar way he’d come to relish, and the hot-blooded feel of it was almost enough to take his mind off of Erwin’s absurd, disapproving expression.

“You gonna tell me what the hell ya got goin’ on, or do ya want me ta play twenty questions with ya?”

“Anybody ever tell ya yer kind of a ball-buster?” Levi frowned into his beer. “I’m gatherin’ my thoughts, now. Stop gettin’ excited.” In truth, he wasn’t entirely sure how much he wanted Erwin to know, and weighing the costs and benefits of it all was sending icy fingers up his spine. But he remembered the way that Erwin had immediately assumed a lie that saved his ass was a necessity, even at the cost of his own reputation, remembered the way Erwin had stared at him that morning when he woke him, remembered the way his mouth formed around the words *tell me your name, please*, that unnecessary “please” at the end belying a sort of tenderness that Levi hadn’t thought to expect. This was the partner he’d been assigned, and despite Levi’s first impressions of Senior Detective Erwin Smith, he’d proven himself to be something beyond the Louisiana Good Ol’ Boy he appeared to be. Levi tried to convince himself that he wouldn’t regret this. It wasn’t particularly working. Whatever this was, this thin thread of trust that stretched between them, this would be the moment it would break. Levi was pretty sure, anyway.

“I told ya I was in Narco, an’ ya probably guessed I was undercover,” he began, pausing as Erwin hummed an acknowledgement and took a sip of his beer.

“Well, they put me in deep. And I...I wasn’ surfacin’ any time soon.”

“Ain’t there supposed ta be some kinda time limit on how long they keep ya deep undercover?”

“There’s supposed ta be a lotta things,” Levi shrugged. “Anyway, my mission was ta get in on some level’a this biker gang that was buried deep in tha Arkansas mountains. They worked all tha way up’n down tha Ozarks, controlled all the drugs from St. Louis to Pine Bluff an’ everywhere in between. They had all them requisite tweakers cookin’ meth out in tha cabins, but meth wasn’ their only gig. One way or another they controlled *everythin’*, an’

it was my job ta infiltrate and observe. But it's....deep cover, man. Some fucked-up shit happened, an' I ended up here."

"What kinda fucked up shit?" Erwin's frown deepened.

"Leave it be, Smith," Levi snapped back, a tremor running from his shoulder through his thumb. "Jus'...when yer deep under, bad shit happens, don't fuckin' ask fer particulars." He took a moment, then, sucking down a swing of beer, breathing a little too heavy for a man seated, but eventually, he pressed on.

"I got a little bit...I got burnt, an the only way they saw ta handle it was early retirement, full pension, medical exemption, that shit. But I wasn'...I wasn' gonna curl in on myself an' die like that. I ain't one fer 'retirement' anyhow. So I asked fer a detective position anywhere they had tha room for me, an' here I am."

Erwin's gut burned with curiosity, but Levi's obvious reluctance made him check his questions...for now, at least. Levi's past was a mystery that he was becoming more and more determined to unravel, though he was sure that it would take some time. Instead of pushing further, he simply nodded. "So...tell me why that has dick to do with our current investigation?"

Levi sipped at his beer, the steel of his gaze a summer storm. He could only give away so much. He would keep the revelation of Pinwheel to himself for now; if the cops down here got turned onto that little tidbit, there was no telling what could happen. There were other drugs in Lottie's system, more common drugs. Levi was willing to bet that Erwin's knowledge of these things was limited, and that he would take him at his word. People are always more willing to believe in what they had heard of before, anyway.

"The meth they make has a chemical signature. A fingerprint, like. An' well, Lottie Jenkins was full of it. I'm willin' ta bet our secon' vic is too, an Ibis ta boot."

"An' if yer gang only runs as far as Pine Bluff, how come they got shit in Erath?"

"Exactly."

Erwin nodded, taking it in. Levi could see his mind making the connections, and he hoped to himself that it wouldn't find the holes in his tale.

"So I went ta Erath."

"On yer own?" Erwin half hissed, thunking his arm down on the table and leaning over it. "What the hell ya did that for?"

"I wasn' sure I could trust ya, I didn' wanna take ya away from yer family ta go on a wild goose chase, an' I needed ta confirm some things fer myself before I brought 'em ta you."

Erwin let his breath out in a huff, his eyes traveling through the near-empty bar. It was dim, no windows, the afternoon sun lost in a haze of cigarette smoke and neon lights. A jukebox in

the corner blared Johnny Cash as a bored-looking bartender polished glasses. He didn't suspect they would be overheard, but it was better to err on the side of caution.

"Alright then," he finally assented, "Tell me what ya found."

Levi pulled out a cigarette and lit it, sizing Erwin up as he pulled in the first drag and blew it out in a stream. "I found some prosts' knew Lottie Jenkins. Gave me 'er name 'fore we got an official ID. Said she was supplyin' 'em with tha drugs. An' as we foun' out today, Lottie Jenkins knew our Ibis."

Levi took another drag before leaning forward conspiratorially, with next words coming in a cloud of smoke, punctuated by a flick of ash, "I think they were all being used like pawns in one hell of a game, Smith. An' at some point, Lil' Ibis decided to start writin' her own rules."

# The Edge of the Undefined

## Chapter Summary

He didn't really know what happened, then, only that when he turned Erwin was suddenly surrounding him, standing over him, his hands planted on the counter on either side of Levi, keeping him there.

## Chapter Notes

Slow Burn intensifies. :3 Also, welcome to the longest chapter thus far ha ha 8D

This chapter is dedicated to [xyuwa](#), who made [this amazing fanart](#). I'm still floored by how incredible it is! Thank you xyuwa!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

Erwin inhaled deeply, smiling as he took in the smells of the first barbecue of spring. Technically it wasn't really warm enough — the unseasonable high-seventies of the daylight hours gave way to temperatures in the low-sixties when the sun went down — but the winter had been tough and he figured this was the kind of balm they all needed. Stephy and Evey ran about the yard, playing all over the combination swing set and jungle gym that Erwin had built for them last summer. Mike had helped, the two of them sweating and cursing while the girls ran around them, nearly vibrating with the excitement of a new toy. It was a good memory. Erwin didn't feel like he was making many of those these days. More and more, he spent his time with Levi. That wasn't a bad thing, per se, but continuously chasing a mystery with no answers in sight didn't suit either one of them.

It didn't help that Levi was starting to creep into other parts of his life, storm-cloud eyes swimming before Erwin's vision at the worst of times. Sometimes, the image of Levi came to him while he showered, sometimes right when he laid down to sleep, one time, memorably, while he thrust himself into Jackie, eyes closed, imagining another wet heat. They rarely fucked anymore, Erwin hiding behind the excuses of work and exhaustion, but that...that had been different. It was a useless thing to think about, now, but it came to him quite unbidden all the same.

“Yer gonna burn them fuckin’ burgers,” Nile grouched, hovering around Erwin with a beer and a sour expression, ever the backseat barbecuer.

“Have I ever burned ‘em before, Dawk?” Erwin asked, raising his brows, “Or is it that ya jus’ can’t handle the spatula bein’ in somebody else’s hand?”

Nile frowned in response.

“When ya’ll host a barbecue, I’ll be more’n happy ta let ya do yer own grillin’. ‘Till then...” Erwin shrugged.

“Where’s tha taxman?” Mike asked, switching the subject with his usual ease.

“I still can’t believe ya got ‘is skinny ass out here,” Nile scoffed. “He never wants’ta hang aroun’ the likes of us. What is it, Erwin, he think he’s too good fer the rest of us?”

“Maybe to good fer white trash like you,” Erwin snorted.

“Jackass,” Nile shot back. Mike grinned, his shaggy hair falling into his eyes. Nanaba strolled out of the house, sharp as always, a six-pack of Budweiser in her hand.

“Hey ladies,” she said easily, depositing the beers on the low-slung patio table and settling down next to Mike. “Where’s Ness?”

“Takin’ a piss,” Nile shrugged. “What’s goin’ on in there?”

“Jus’ the usual hen-peckin’,” Nana replied with a shrug. “Smith, yer partner sure makes himself useful in the kitchen.”

“Really?” Erwin asked, genuinely surprised. “He never really struck me as tha culinary type.”

“He ain’t cookin’,” Nana clarified, “He’s cleanin’. Wish ‘e’d come over ta my place, sure could use a good cleanin’ these days.”

“No lie,” Mike said, then his eyes widened slightly and he sucked down an overly-large swig of his beer. Erwin pretended to not have heard him and luckily, Nile did as well. They had all pretty much guessed that Mike and Nanaba were involved, but no one talked about it and, in Erwin’s opinion, no one ever should. If they got busted, they would get in big trouble and anyway, in Erwin’s view, nobody had a right to tell a man what to do in his own bedroom.

“Why’s’e always hangin’ out with tha women, anyhow?” Nile broke in, frowning.

“Maybe ‘e’s had more experience with ‘em than you, Dawk,” Ness sauntered up, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Or, maybe he jus’ blends in better.” Nile shot back, brows raised.

“Hey now,” Erwin frowned.



“It’s cute how ya get defensive of ‘em,” it seemed Nile had caught the scent of blood, and Erwin was reminded of why they never worked well as partners. He and Levi quarreled often enough, but Nile would needle at you until he got a reaction, then he would wring the subject until he bled you dry. It drove Erwin insane.

“Ya get defensive about all yer boyfriends like that?”

“C’mon, Nile, lay the fuck off,” Ness broke in. “Anyway I dunno how much of a boyfrien’ the tax man would be. Seems better suited ta bein’ a housewife. Mus’ be nice havin’ two a’ them, Smith.”

“Shutup now, ya’ll,” Nanaba rolled her eyes. “I think Levi’s tha smart one...I’d rather hang out with Marie an’ Jacks than ya’ll any day. Conversation’s better and so’s the company.”

“Wait, Nana, you tryin’ ta convince us yer actually a woman somewhere under there?”

Mike threw an empty beer can at Nile, then, and it bounced off his head at a jaunty angle just as Erwin’s girls came screeching past. They all laughed, and Erwin was grateful to change to subject. None of them had any reason to know how close to home they were actually hitting; the homo jokes were standard locker-room fare, the likes of which Erwin had been hearing (and to some extent, making) since middle school. Nevertheless, he’d rather it not be brought up at all.

The talk turned to March Madness, each of them hedging their bets and disagreeing vehemently as Erwin flipped the burgers, angling for that perfect char.

Inside, Jackie and Marie pulled together baked beans, potato salad, broccoli slaw, huge bowls of potato chips, and Marie’s locally famous chocolate brownies. Levi was stationed semi-permanently in front of the sink, washing dishes so meticulously that Marie had already asked to hire him twice.

“Doubt yer husband’s gonna want me aroun’,” Levi muttered in response.

“Nile? Oh, he just talks out his ass, you shouldn’ listen. Nile wouldn’ hurt a fly, ya know. He jus’ acts prickly ‘cause ‘e’s sensitive.”

Levi turned around, brow raised. “Is that so?”

“Course it is. Ya’ll should’a seen him when Erwin asked fer a differen’ assignment. He moped around fer weeks.”

Levi concentrated intensely on the plate he was washing, scrubbing away at nonexistent grime.

“Jesus, Levi, ya washin’ that plate or makin’ it repent fer a life of sin?” Jackie laughed, patting his back as she walked by.

“Sorry,” he muttered back, rinsing the plate reluctantly and moving on to a large pot.

Marie and Jackie began talking about things Levi had no concept of...local schools and teachers, the PTA, the frustrations and joys of sending the children to grandma's, interior decor and on and on. Levi was soothed by their conversation, the sounds of their voices, their laughter providing a backdrop for his thoughts as he washed and washed, the cycle of dishes endless as the women wrapped up their cooking.

His mind wandered, then, wandered to the same dark halls it had been wandering to for months now. His halls were full of ghosts these days, full of unanswered questions and the painful reality of what he might need to do to find those answers. He never wanted to go back, but the Pinwheel was a fingerprint that could only lead back to one source...and if he went to the source, maybe he could find whatever horror linked Ibis, Lottie Jenkins, and Andrew Gutierrez.

It was a last option. A nothing-left-to-lose option. And he was about half a step away from taking it, at this point. Despite having Erwin's help, months had passed and he was no closer to an answer. Andrew had joined the ghosts that stood around his bed on the bad nights, though Lottie, quite mercifully, stayed away. He knew that Ibis had murdered Lottie, and that she was somehow connected to Andrew. Yet she hadn't killed Andrew. The murder was all wrong, not her style at all...but who, then, deserved the blame?

Levi had been sweet-talking the case worker for weeks, and still she wouldn't allow him to see Ibis. The trail was getting colder and colder, and he could feel it, like an itch beneath his skin. He was drinking now more than ever, watching himself spiral as if from another body, and no one, *no one* knew. The isolation was profound. At least when he was deep under, he'd had something of a patchwork family, cobbled together by desperation and the strange shared understanding of what it was to be a little too different in a world where different could get you killed.

"Levi, if yer thoughts were any heavier yer head would fall off. Did ya hear me?"

He looked up to find Jackie standing next to him, and with some effort, pulled on his usual mask of indifference.

"Sorry, Jacks, I didn'. Got a little lost, there."

"Don't I know. I asked if ya wouldn't mind taken some a' tha food out for me?"

"Course not."

He stripped off his wet gloves and hung them over the faucet, toweling off his front where the water had splashed. Jackie loaded him up with two bowls of potato salad and tucked a beer under his arm—she was astute, and knew he wouldn't want to go outside without it. With that he was sent out to this thing that Erwin called a "cook-out," a pit of dread fixed firmly in his guts.

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All in all, it wasn't so bad. Levi tossed back beer after beer, finally taking a covert swig off his flask to get things going. He'd never understood the sort of good ol' boy ribbing that went

on in these situations but that was alright, he mostly just stayed quiet. Occasionally Jackie or Erwin would try to engage him, and he would mutter out brief responses, but otherwise he kept his thoughts to himself, sucking down beers and picking around a burger and potato salad. This was as good-natured and sociable as he knew how to be these days. There had been another time...but now, the past was the past, and now was now. He even let Nile bum a cigarette.

Eventually, however, everyone was done eating, the beer was gone, and the girls were feeling sleepy. The guests filtered away after being thoroughly hugged and handed generously sized containers of leftovers, the largest of which was reserved for Levi. "Erwin tattled on ya," Jackie offered with a wink. "Told me about yer pantry. Ya know you can eat over here anytime, right?"

"I know," Levi said. "Wanna put that in the fridge? I'll do yer dishes 'fore I go."

"Now, you don't gotta do that," Jackie argued, but Levi was adamant. He hated feeling like he owed anything to anyone, ever, and Erwin's family had already given him so much. Finally, she gave up just as Erwin walked in from scraping down the grill.

"Well, I gotta put the girls ta bed, so I'll leave ya'll to it. If I don't see ya, Levi, have a good night, alright?"

"You too, Jacks. Thanks again."

She set off down the hall and Levi set to washing, Erwin bustling around behind him.

"Can you believe Ness' got 'is eye on Cincinnati this year?" Erwin asked, pulling out a stool to sit on and sipping at one last beer. He was a little beyond tipsy and the sound of it was in his voice, in the way his mouth slid around the words. Levi just shrugged.

"Ain't never put much stock in basketball, ya know," he said mildly.

"Oh yeah? Whadd'ya watch then?"

"Nothin'. Mostly I jus' read and...think."

"Course you do. I bet ya don't even own a TV." Erwin laughed softly.

"I don't much see what tha big deal is," Levi muttered, rinsing a glass.

"Competition, I guess. Team spirit."

"I'd rather compete against myself," Levi replied, "and I've never much been one fer teams."

"I suppose not. Wanna hand?"

"I got it."

"I'll dry then."

Levi tried to dissuade him, but Erwin insisted. Soon enough they had something of a system, with Levi washing each dish meticulously before handing it off to Erwin, who would dry it and then put it away.

“I know ya ain’t one fer socializin’, but ya didn’t seem ta have such a bad time tonight, if ya don’ mind me sayin’.”

Levi scoffed. “Yeah, alright Smith, whatever ya need ta tell yerself.”

Erwin laughed a little too loud, a little too long. Levi scrubbed at a bowl with a frown.

“I’ll tell ya, one of us enjoyed ‘imself tonight,” Levi finally commented.

“I can’t believe that stick don’ come outta yer ass even when yer drinkin’.” Erwin sighed, leaning one hip against the counter, crossing his arms as he looked down at Levi. “Is there anything in this entire fuckin’ world that gets you to lighten up?”

Levi turned the water off, the bowl rinsed, and handed it to Erwin. “I fig’ger that ain’t yer business, Smith,” he replied, feeling testy, tired. It had been a long night, he didn’t have the energy for the verbal parry and Erwin wasn’t sober, anyway. It was best not to linger. The dishes were nearly done, then he could be on his way.

Erwin dried the bowl as Levi went back to his washing.

“Anyway, as I see it, ya’ll do too much relaxin aroun’ here. None a’ you seem ta know how ta deal with anythin’ else.”

“C’mon, Levi, I been meeting with you every week, an’ I follow every lead ya pull outta yer crazy ass.”

“Yeah, but you ain’t generatin’ yer own, are ya?” Levi let the question drop like lead between them.

Erwin came back, the bowl deposited safely in the cabinet, and leaned his hip on the counter again. Levi ignored his rolled-up shirtsleeves, ignored the way the golden hair of his arm laid flat against the golden hues of his skin, ignored the way his bicep stretched the fabric of his shirt. Instead, he opted to scrub at the last glass in the sink like he was being tested on it, sponge covering every surface in a haze of bubbles as Erwin’s stare bore holes into the side of his head. He rinsed the glass, handed it to Erwin, and then turned to take off his dish gloves.

He didn’t really know what happened, then, only that when he turned Erwin was suddenly surrounding him, standing over him, his hands planted on the counter on either side of Levi, keeping him there. Levi looked up, his mouth dropping open slightly, eyes wide with shock, but Erwin just stood there staring down at him, the look in his eyes unreadable...or, Levi thought, perhaps he simply didn’t want to read it.

They both stood that way, breathing, staring, not a word spoken for what felt like an eternity. Levi thought several times that maybe, perhaps Erwin was leaning toward him. In the end,

neither of them moved. Finally, with a shuddering breath, Levi willed his voice to remain steady as he said, “Forget where yer glass goes, Smith?”

The moment was broken. Erwin turned away, deposited the glass in the cabinet, and tossed his empty beer bottle in the trash can. Levi stood, back still pressed against the counter, and brought two fingers up to find his pulse.

It was steady as a beating drum.

“I’ll see myself out,” he said to Erwin’s retreating back. If Erwin replied at all, Levi didn’t hear him.

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They didn’t talk about it at work on Monday, nor the day after that. Levi told himself that they shouldn’t talk about it, at all, ever. He’d pegged Erwin for being a closet-case the day they met, but during that first dinner at his house, with the girls chattering and Jackie’s smart-mouthed goodness, Levi had hoped rather desperately that, for once, he was wrong. He’d never put much stock in family values, but Erwin had something good there, and Levi wasn’t even sure he could see it for what it was.

And yet he couldn’t force aside the electricity of the moment, the way that he crackled with life, the way he’d felt surrounded, the way his heartbeat had steadied out, against all odds, surrounded by the warmth and the smell of him, barbecue smoke and beer and the deeper notes of a musk that Levi was shocked to realized he was starting to crave. He’d driven out to the middle of nowhere that night, smoked half a pack of cigarettes while he looked at the stars. It was the beer, he told himself. It wouldn’t happen again.

They’d gone about their business, doing their paperwork, going out to scenes, the day-to-day grind, and Erwin acted as though nothing had happened at all. Levi watched him over his typewriter and wondered if he realized that he was a liar, or if it had become such an integral part of his survival that he could no longer see it, feel it...was he desensitized to the deceptions he created to manage the world around him? It made sense, after all. How else could he have made it through this long, being what he was in a world like this?

Levi understood deception, understood how something that might have once seemed repugnant could slowly insinuate itself into your life until it seemed harmless. Normal. The trouble was, it was only normalizing itself to you. For anyone else, it was just as awful as it had ever been, and eventually those two worlds would collide. It was a matter of time for Erwin Smith. Levi didn’t want to be part of the blowout. So he pushed it aside, buried that electricity, forced himself to ignore his scent even when it wafted over across their desks. He couldn’t do it...not to Jacks, not to the girls. He wouldn’t be a part of Erwin Smith’s downfall.

Days later, they were meeting in that same empty bar, Erwin picking out a selection of music on the jukebox to mask their conversation as Levi grabbed a pitcher of beer and two glasses. This had become a routine since they’d caught Ibis, one that Levi refused to admit enjoying.

“Any news on ol’ Ibis?” Erwin asked, settling into his seat.

“Still ain’t allowed ta’ see ‘er, but I found somethin’ else...” Levi pulled a file out of his briefcase along with that ever-present notebook.

“We don’t know Ibis’ exact identity or age,” he said, opening the file, “but she seems ta be aroun’ seventeen, eighteen, right? An we know she got brown hair, blue eyes...”

“Right,” Erwin said, straining to see whatever Levi had in his file.

“Hold yer fuckin’ horses. Anyway, I was thinkin’...instead of followin’ up tha drug link quite yet, what if we look at Ibis, see if she was kidnapped?”

“Can I ask ya somethin’, Levi?”

Levi shifted in his seat and frowned. “You sure are adverse ta lettin’ me tell ya about this, aren’t ya?”

“No, it’s jus’ that...you found this drug connection and ya confirmed tha meth was present in the blood a’ all tha victims an’ Ibis. Why aren’t we chasin’ up the supplier?”

“Because we need more,” Levi frowned, “We need ta know where our killer came from. Why she started killin’ tha people she was partyin’ with. Where they was partyin’, ya know, all of it. Tha supplier might know about it or ‘e might not, who fuckin’ knows? The only real link we have here is Ibis. We gotta focus on her.”

“Fine. Continue.”

“Alright, so, anyway, I was looking through tha teen disappearances, but then I thought...what if she weren’t no teen? What if she was a kid?”

Erwin grimaced, nodded. Kid stuff always got to him, especially with girls, which Levi figured was understandable, considering.

“So I found...this.” He pulled a few papers and a photograph out of the file and laid them out in front of Erwin, who frowned down at them. Levi had brought a missing-person’s report from ’81 for a five-year-old girl by the name of Matilda MaCarty. She had long, brown curls, big blue eyes, and a beautiful, gap-tooth smile. Erwin didn’t see Ibis in her at all, but Ibis was insane. He looked at the disappearance date...October 12th.

“Not too far off from Andrew Guiterriez,” Levi added, nodding at the date.

“Sure, if ya don’ count tha twelve years in between ‘em,” Erwin sighed, rubbing his hand over his mouth. “But maybe it’s worth lookin’ into...”

“Maybe so,” Levi shrugged, sipping at his beer. “She still has family ‘bout twenty miles outside Lafayette. Wanna go talk to ‘em?”

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The next day was quiet around the office, quiet enough that no one really missed them when, after lunch, neither man bothered to return. With the breeze light and the sun out, it was a

great day to hit the new golf range on the other side of town, and there simply wasn't much else to do.

No one would have guessed that they were driving out into the deltas, seeking a family who'd lost a little girl twelve years prior.

"So yer tellin' me we ain't gonna talk to 'er parents," Erwin asked, driving with his knee while he slipped on his sunglasses.

"Can't seem ta' locate 'em. This' her aunt 'n uncle, maybe they can shed some light on wherever mom an' dad got off to."

Erwin hoped he looked more confident than he felt. This was a longshot, and as far as he was concerned, they should have been chasing up the drug lead, but Levi seemed reticent in a way he couldn't quite pin down. He was at least mostly sure that there was some component in all of this that Levi was playing close to the chest, but he wasn't ready to bring it up yet. He would keep chasing down the family for now, but these investigation was wearing on him in a way he couldn't explain. His mind wandered wistfully to that little hollow in the woods...it had been too long, and he couldn't stop wondering if he started going there with more regularity if he would find Levi among the trees.

It may have been pure wishful thinking, but that moment in the kitchen had been an answer to a question he'd never intended to ask. Levi hadn't moved, hadn't punched him or shoved him away. He'd just stood there, frozen, his breath quivering in a way that spoke louder than any words. Part of Erwin wished it had never happened; he would have been able to ignore the way his gut got tight around Levi, would have been able to tell himself that it would never happen, that Levi was straight like the rest of them. But since then...

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do about it, what he was supposed to do about the fact that Levi seemed intent on acting like it never happened. For now, he buried it, contenting himself with the extra time they spent working on this god-forsaken case. He watched Levi's obsession with it growing, intensifying, yet he continued to encourage it. In a way, he supposed, it fed his own.

They pulled into the driveway and parked, and Erwin took in the sight of the house with a low whistle. It was ramshackle in the way that most of the delta houses were, crooked on it's foundation and held together by what he could only imagine to be pure determination. Playing at houses like this as a child was part of what convinced him to become a cop; he never wanted to raise a family in a dump like this, and the thought of it scared him enough to make him choose a career and stick with it, even when his friends changed their minds again and again.

Levi tossed a look at him and then stepped out of the car. Erwin had to hurry to keep up with his brisk, determined steps. Levi was the one to knock, just four quick raps on the door. Something moved inside, and Erwin's hand drifted slightly, not so far that it rested on his gun, but close to it. The seconds stretched on, and Levi raised his hand again, preparing to knock a second time. Just then, the door opened, and they were confronted with a woman who appeared to be missing half her teeth, grey hair frizzy and undone, dressed only in a floral print nightgown.

“Whadda ya’ll want, huh?” She asked, her voice raspy and low.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” Levi said, pulling on the more charming of his facades. “I’m Detective Levi, this is my partner, Senior Detective Smith. Would you happen ta be Mrs. Macarty?”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah, tha’s me.”

“We were wonderin’ if we could talk to ya fer a bit...nothin’ official, just clearin’ out some old case files.”

She eyed Levi, then looked at Erwin, skeptical. Levi pulled out his cigarettes, tapping one free and offering it to her. She took it, slowly, tucked it behind her ear and sighed. “I guess I’ll answer some questions, but mah stories are about ta come on, so yer gonna have a be quick like.”

“We appreciate it, ma’am,” Levi nodded. They followed her into the house and Erwin noted the newspaper that covered the windows, the fans that blew stale, smoky air fifteen different ways, the knick knacks and religious paraphernalia that littered every surface.

“Is yer husband home, ma’am?” Erwin asked, his tone benign. “We’d love ta talk ta tha both of ya, if’n ya don’t mind.”

“Nah, ‘e’s out checkin’ ‘is crab traps.”

“Well, that’s alright,” Levi assured her. “I’m sure you’ll be able ta help us on yer own.”

“Yer better talkin’ ta me anyhow, Ed’s mean as a hornet an’ ‘e ain’t too bright, neither.” She shuffled off to the kitchen and poured sweet tea into three glasses, each adorned with white and yellow daisies. She brought the glasses of tea into the living room on a tray and gestured for them to take a seat. “Now, ya’ll wanna tell me what yer botherin’ an old women fer?”

“Course we do,” Levi took his tea with a nod and tapped his own cigarette out of the pack, lighting it up before he began. “‘bout...twelve years ago, now, yer niece Matilda was kidnapped, is that right?”

“Sure, in a manner’a speakin’,” Mrs. Macarty replied, pulling the cigarette from behind her ear and lighting it.

“What manner’a speakin’, can I ask?” Levi pressed, sucking down smoke and exhaling it in a cloud.

“Well, in tha manner that ‘er daddy took ‘er, and ‘er mommy ran off.”

“Her daddy?” Levi asked, tilting his head. “How come she was reported missin’?”

Mrs. Macarty shrugged. “Her momma was a junkie, didn’ want ‘im takin’ ‘er. But it was fer tha best, an’ she fig’gered that out soon enough an’ dropped tha charges.”

“An’ ‘er daddy is...yer brother?”



“Ed’s half-brother, near as I can fig’ger.”

“An’ ya’ll have talked to ‘im since then?”

“I suppose Ed has, I never really knew ‘im...but, on account ‘a them havin’ different daddies, they never got along so well. It was kinda good riddance ta tha lot of ‘em.”

“I see.” Levi nodded, tapping away his ash on the edge of her glass ashtray. “Well, I think we’ve taken up enough of yer time.”

“Fine, fine,” she muttered, standing up to send them on their way.

“Jus’ ta be sure,” Erwin asked as they reached the door, “Ya haven’t ever talked ta tha girl?”

“Not since ‘er daddy done took her away.”

“An do ya’ll know where they went?” Levi asked, as if it were an offhand remark.

“I fig’gered back to where ‘is family’s from, over there in Mississippi.”

“Well, Mrs. Macarty, I thank ya fer yer time.”

The two of them shook her hand and then made their way back to the car, barely making it inside before Levi began theorizing.

“I don’t think she’s lyin’, but I do think she’s wrong,” he started. “Why wouldn’ she even know where he went?”

“Ya know not everybody talks to their family, right?”

“Yeah, I know, but how come this report still comes up active?”

“Could’a been a clerical error, ya know,” Erwin offered.

“Could’a been, but I don’ know, Erwin, ya really think there ain’t no chance this lil’ girl is our Ibis?”

“I’ll be honest, it’s a fuckin’ slim chance, as far as I see it...”

“You don’ feel it? The wrongness of it?”

“You don’ think some a’ that might jus’ be yer own...” Erwin trailed off, waving his hand vaguely as he drove.

“My own what, Erwin?” Levi asked, a bit of acid creeping into his tone.

“Look, sometimes ya tend ta jump ta conclusions, that’s all.”

“An’ you tend ta tell me I’m wrong when I ain’t.”

Erwin opened his mouth to speak, but Levi cut him off at the pass.

“No, listen ta me. When have I been wrong about any a’ this shit? I knew there was more ta Andrew Gutierrez’s case, I knew tha killer jumped in tha lake, an’ ya never fuckin’ listen do ya? Ya might wanna consider that ya don’t actually know jack shit, Smith. Or at least ya need ta start listenin’ to yer gut a little better, ya know?”

“Whaddya mean, listen ta my gut?” Erwin asked, frowning at the road. “I listen ta my gut jus’ fine, but gut instinct ain’t gonna get us no conviction. We need evidence, Levi, solid fuckin’ evidence. An’ if somebody did take Ibis, an’ they tried ta take Andrew, an’ we find ‘em usin’ yer gut intuition, then tha likelihood a’ that person walkin’ is sky-high. You been doin’ this long enough ta know that.”

Levi pulled out a cigarette, cracked the window, and lit it up, pushing the smoke through his nostrils the way he did when Erwin pissed him off. Erwin didn’t much care about Levi pouting, and he pushed on all the same.

“Look, I’ll go on this goose chase with ya, but I’m gonna be honest, Levi, sometimes ya go wild. An’ that ain’t gonna cut it. I’ll do what I can ta keep ya in tha department but ya gotta walk tha fuckin’ line. I mean jus’ at least enough ta keep in tha chief’s good side, yeah?”

Levi blew out a lungful of smoke, and remained silent for the rest of the drive.

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Once they got back, Levi excused himself and went home for the day. Erwin stuck around, completing paperwork and shooting the shit with Mike. He wasn’t even sure why he was staying at the office, just that he felt keyed up, antsy. It was the same feeling he got before a big summer storm, like he was standing on the edge of something undefined, blindfolded, walking on a tightrope. Or maybe that was just bullshit. Either way he remained, even after Mike left, even after Brenda came to tell him she was going home. With the office to himself, he pulled out the MaCarty file, staring down at the picture of the little girl with the curls and the big blue eyes.

His mind wandered back to Ibis, her lips erupted in blisters, her psychotic rambling, the sheer violence of her. He thought about the man in the cabin, stabbed with such vigor, thought of her kneeling over Levi with a cast-iron lamp held aloft in two hands. She was so small and so broken, almost otherworldly in a way he couldn’t explain.

*We sing in harmony.* He’d seen Levi scribbling the phrase in his notebook again and again and again, as if the sheer repetition of it would provide the answers they sought.

Troubled, he rose from his desk and stepped around to Levi’s. It was immaculate, not a paper out of place, not a single sign of anything personal anywhere to be seen. Three pens and two pencils sat in a cup at the corner next to an ink pad. An unused yellow legal pad sat on the corner, a rolodex faced Erwin’s desk, and a large calendar filled up the rest of the space. Erwin’s desk was cluttered, personal, containing pictures of his girls and Jackie, pieces of him scattered throughout. Levi’s desk looked like its occupant expected to leave at any moment.

Again, Erwin was seized with curiosity. No one was here, after all, no one would know. Carefully, he eased open the top drawer of Levi's desk. On top, there was a sketchpad—it was blank, as Erwin discovered when he flipped through it. Beneath that, there were some packages of pens, envelopes, and a few more notebooks. It wasn't until Erwin removed all of those things that he found what he was looking for. There, on the very bottom of the desk drawer, was a photo of Andrew Gutierrez's corpse...right alongside a surveillance picture of Ibis.

"Of all tha things you could keep aroun'..." Erwin muttered softly. "What's goin' on in that pretty head a' yers?"

He spent quite awhile, there, surrounded by the generic detritus of Levi's space, the two photographs sticking out like beacons in the fog of his understanding. He wasn't sure how much time had passed by the time he finally stood, only that it was dark.

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By the time he walked in the door, his house was quiet. The clock read 10:37, but Jackie went to bed early most days, her part-time work at the hospital leaving her exhausted. There was a note on the table saying that there was a plate of spaghetti in the fridge. Erwin found it alongside a cold beer and tucked in while reading the newspaper. He liked it like this, when the house was quiet, but he found himself missing his girls. He'd been spending so much time working on this case, he'd not been around as much as usual. He told himself he'd spend the weekend home, at least. Give Jacks a break from being the parent all the time.

His meal finished, Erwin took a long, hot shower, jacked off to thoughts of grey eyes, slender fingers and dark hair, and finally, after toweling off, slipped into bed next to Jackie. Sleep began to roll over him in waves, a bit at a time. Just as he began to slip under it's spell, however, he was shocked awake by a piercing noise. It took a moment for him to process the fact that it was the bedside phone ringing, but when it finally dawned on him, he answered it sleepily.

"Yeah?" he croaked.

"Smith, sorry ta wake ya, but we got us a situation an we need ya to consult."

"Who is this?" he asked, his mind spinning as it tried to catch up.

"Local police, Erath."

"Wha-...what happened?"

"Homocide. But uh...there's some...some interestin' shit. We ain't allowed ta touch it 'till ya get here."

"Alright, alright, I'm comin'," Erwin groaned, getting out of bed as Jackie stirred and grunted. "Is Levi there?"

"Nah, we can't reach 'im. But we need ya out here asap."

“Alright, I’ll see if I can rouse ‘im.”

Erwin wrote down quick directions, pulled on some clothes, told Jackie not to worry and to rest, and made his way out the door about fifteen minutes after he’d hung up. The clock read 1:45, and as he drove to Levi’s apartment, exhaustion pushed at his eyelids. He thought that this, whatever it was, had better be good.

He reached Levi’s apartment by two, the drive shortened by the complete lack of traffic. He parked, stepped out, and frowned. Something was off.

Next to Levi’s truck was a car that Erwin had never seen before, a black sedan with deeply tinted windows. Inside, there was a light on in the second story bedroom window...the one that Levi never used. He could see the shadows of multiple people moving around and, by his estimation, they looked to be circling one another. It looked like...it looked like some kind of *fight*.

Erwin’s heart skipped a beat as one shadow appeared to punch the other, though it was hard to tell where with the way they jumped and moved about. Levi was in with a rough crowd, and he had been in deep cover. If one of his old friends had found him...

Erwin drew his gun and moved to the door; it was unlocked. Levi never left his doors unlocked. As quietly as he could, Erwin moved in, not bothering to close the door behind him. Exhaustion had fallen off him like a veil; he was wide-awake now, ready for action. He made his way down the hall and up the stairs as silently as possible, flinching when he heard the impact of a fist hitting flesh, anger flashing through him as he heard a groan that he knew, deep in his gut, belonged to Levi. There were voices, and then another impact, another groan. Erwin’s vision was half white as he reached the second floor, flattened his back against the wall, and moved slowly toward the light escaping beneath the door at the end of the hall. He couldn’t know how many people were in there, couldn’t know who they were or why they were here, couldn’t know what Levi had done to land himself in this situation, but none of that was relevant now.

A corpse could wait. Whoever Levi’s attackers were, Erwin was damn sure he was going to come down on them like the hand of judgement itself. He took a breath, he blew it out. He was ready.

# Chicken Feather Angel Wings

## Chapter Summary

“Police!” He barked out at the top of his lungs, bursting through the door and leveling his gun at a man he’d never seen before, a man dressed all in black, a man thickly muscled, his hands clenched in fists.

## Chapter Notes

There are a few notes at the end of the chapter this time! I've teased this chapter a lot on Tumblr....hope you guys enjoy!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A long time ago, perhaps a lifetime ago, Erwin had been trained in emergency procedure. It was the sort of training that they all got in police academy, but no one wanted to use. Even so, it was mandatory, and they practiced kicking in doors and darting around corners until it was muscle memory. In the moment, adrenaline pumping, heart pounding, it all came flooding back.

“Police!” He barked out at the top of his lungs, bursting through the door and leveling his gun at a man he’d never seen before, a man dressed all in black, a man thickly muscled, his hands clenched in fists. For one, inexplicably long moment, everyone in the room was frozen, silent, staring at one another dumbly. Erwin saw Levi, who was wearing nothing more than an incongruous pair of briefs and a strange, trancelike expression on his face. He dismissed it for now, focusing his attention on the man, the stranger. The attacker. The look of panic painted across his face. Something was off. Something was strange. Erwin felt, deep in his gut, that he wasn’t supposed to be here. His mind stuttered just as the man started to speak.

“Red! Red. What the fuck, man, what the fuck? Red red red, I didn’t fuckin’ sign up for this shit. Fuck, is that a real gun? Levi, come out of it...”

Levi shook his head slowly, and Erwin felt a surge of anger. “What the hell’s goin’ on here?”

“Honest to god, man, he hired me, I’m a professional, I’m a professional! Can you please put the gun down? Levi, c’mon, man, tell him you hired me.”

Levi smacked his lips together, blinked, and shook his head again. “Hey, Erwin, the fuck’re ya doin’ here...” he finally said, “Put yer fuckin’ gun down ya stupid cunt. He ain’t lyin’. I hired ‘im. Now stop...fuckin’...freakin’ out.”

Erwin looked at the man, his big, scared eyes, the way his hands trembled in the air...then looked over at Levi, who was trying to stand with marginal success, his hand cradling his ribs. “Are...are ya sure now?” he asked, but he was already moving to click the safety back on.

“Yeah, ya fuckin’ idiot, Jesus Christ. How tha fuck’d ya even get in here?”

“The door was unlocked,” Erwin mumbled, finally lowering his weapon.

“God damnit,” Levi grumbled, coughing softly.

The man dropped his hands slowly, and Erwin tucked the gun back into his holster. Levi’s eyes travelled to the man and he muttered, “I’m real sorry, Sir, my partner apparently lacks a sense a’ propriety.”

“Fuck you,” the man muttered, his hands still shaking. “Fuck you. Seriously. I’ve been doing this for eight years and I never had somethin’ like this happen. I drove all the way from Baton Rouge fer you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll tell ya what...” Levi’s eyes darted to Erwin and he frowned. He limped over to the man and gestured for him to lean down. With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, the man obliged, and Levi whispered something in his ear. Erwin watched as the man’s eyes widened, his features softening into something like a smile.

Levi pulled away and let his eyes fall up and down the man in a way that made Erwin’s blood boil.

“So...yer gonna come next time I call, aren’t ya?” Levi asked, lips quirked.

The man set his features in a grimace and said, “I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” Levi replied, nodding. “Now I fig’ger I got somethin’ ta deal with here, but yer money’s on tha kitchen counter. Help yerself to a beer on tha way out if ya wanna.”

“Do ya...” the man started, eyeing Erwin warily. “Do ya need anythin’?”

Levi snorted. “Nah. He busts on in here, he’s gonna have ta live with the consequences.”

“Alright,” the man said. Erwin frowned at him. “See ya. Maybe.”

“Bye,” Levi said, waving him out. Once the man had walked from the room, Levi slumped against the wall and coughed again. Erwin moved toward him, but he held up a finger, and Erwin stopped, fidgeting in place.

“Smith,” Levi started. “Do ya know I paid three hundred fuckin’ dollars to get him here t’night? Plus gas, alcohol an’ food?”

Erwin was quiet.

“An then yer fool-ass busts in here an’ fucks up the best action I’ve had in the better part of a year? I should fuckin’ make you pay fer that shit.”

The sound of the front door slamming spurred Levi to push himself off the wall, pushing past Erwin with what he felt was unnecessary force. He followed a few feet behind Levi, a thousand questions swirling in his head as they made their way downstairs.

Levi walked to his fridge and pulled out a beer, popping the cap off and taking a long swig. Erwin knew that he was here for a reason, but his mind was swimming and his eyes kept travelled to Levi’s torso, which was somewhat shockingly well-muscled.

“Somethin’ on yer mind, Smith?” Levi asked, crossing one arm over his chest and eyeing Erwin over his beer.

“What...ah...what was that? Who was he?” Erwin started, hoping Levi wouldn’t comment on the unsteady quality of his voice.

“Somebody I paid ta beat me up,” Levi replied, his voice defiant. “Ya gotta problem with that, church boy? Nah, ‘course ya don’. Ya can’t stop starin’ at my fuckin’ body.”

Erwin’s eyes snapped up to Levi’s face, his protest dying on his lips.

“Keep yer eyes ta yerself, Smith,” he mumbled, then pushed away from the counter and walked into the living room where he slept. “Don’t fuckin’ follow me. Jus’...stay out there an’ gather yer fuckin’ thoughts.”

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Half an hour later, they were both in the official car, riding to Erath in strained silence. Erwin had explained everything he knew about the situation, but aside from that, they’d both remained fairly silent. Levi was frustrated, his insides crawling about with the dissatisfaction caused by the interruption of his earlier appointment. *I should be begging to eat cum right now*, he thought to himself, his nerves alight. *Instead...*

His eyes travelled over to Erwin, who was driving with a stony expression. Levi wished he could believe that the source of Erwin’s discomfort lay in the gender of the person he’d discovered Levi with, or in the taboo of what they were doing. But considering that some level of sadomasochism was almost inherent in gay porn, which he was sure Erwin had spent some quality time with, and after that moment in the kitchen, Levi could only surmise that Erwin’s dark looks were hardly based on moral outrage. Levi lit a cigarette and tried to ignore the way the world around him went in and out. It wasn’t good, being interrupted like that. He felt scrambled, like a god damned egg.

The drive stretched on longer than it had any right too, and Levi wondered if it was possible to get stuck in a moment, like a skipping record. The frailty of reality, the all-powerful force of perception, the pinpoints of starlight above him ever-frozen, the two of them in this car, on this road, driving eternal...the thought of it gave him chills, and once he started shivering, he couldn't stop. Pretty soon his teeth were chattering, his whole body shaking, and Erwin looked over at him and muttered, "Jesus. Ya had a beer before we left, didn' ya?"

"It ain't withdrawal." Levi replied, his teeth knocking together so hard they were starting to hurt. "It's...yer dumb ass bustin' in on me durin' a scene. Havin' someone wailin' on ya like that an then jus'...nothin', full stop? It fucks with yer chemicals."

Erwin was quiet, the chattering of Levi's teeth setting him on edge.

"Look," Levi blew the word out in a cloud of smoke, "Ya wanna talk about it or somethin'?"

"Not really, I jus'...well...I...how long've ya been into...this?"

"Are ya talkin' about me bein' a fag, or a pain slut?"

Erwin's discomfort with the words was palpable; Levi wanted it that way, euphemisms were useless to them, now. They were fuckups in a world that only rewarded conformity. Levi did his best to tone down the extent of his oddity, but there was only so much he could do. Erwin, on the other hand, was a Golden Boy. A family man. And a stone-cold liar. Levi wished he didn't know what it was like to lie so hard for so long that it felt like nothing at all.

"It's alright. Words don' do half tha damage that fists do, an' if words are all they're hittin' ya with, yer a lucky fuck."

Erwin nodded, tight lipped.

"Anyway, I've been both as long as I can remember." Levi finished his cigarette, smashed it in the ashtray, and lit a new one. "You?"

"Same. About...not...not the pain stuff."

Levi nodded. "An' ya married Jackie 'cause ya fig'ered you could...go straight, for a woman that good?"

Levi could see Erwin's jaw clench. "No," he said stiffly. "I love Jackie. I married 'er 'cause I love 'er."

Erwin practically flinched as Levi snorted derisively. "Really? Ya love 'er? Is that why ya lie to 'er bout' fuckin' other men?"

"I don't..." Erwin said far too quickly, almost physically biting his tongue. He didn't want to get into this. It was none of Levi's god damned business anyway.

"You don'?" Then whaddya do? Cruise out in tha woods fer a suck? Hire boys ta meet ya in a hotel up in tha big city jus' ta look at 'em? Pop a woody over yer partner when ya get tipsy enough an' hope he don' tell the wife?"



“God damnit Levi, its none a’ yer fuckin’ business, but don’t fuckin’ ...don’t say...I *love* my wife. Not like you would know a damn thing about it. I love Jacks.”

“Well, ya know what, Erwin? That makes you one hell of an ass.”

“Yer one ta talk.”

“No, I’m fuckin’ serious. She never signed up ta be yer fuckin’ beard. And now she’s got two kids of yers and yer a fuckin’ ...tickin’ time bomb.”

“Now what the hell’s that supposed ta mean?” Erwin was blustering, angry. “I ain’t gonna hurt Jackie...”

“You already have, Hoss!” Levi said, his voice rising as he twisted in his seat toward Erwin. “You jus’ told me you ain’t never been straight. An’ fine, me neither, but I sure as hell ain’t never married a woman and knocked ‘er up twice and pretended that shit was sustainable. I bet yer sex life is already shit. You get yer action on the side an’ tell Jacks you have a headache and meanwhile that discontent is buildin’. And maybe, fer now, yer girls are enough ta keep ya rooted there with ‘er, but one a these days you wont be able ta take it anymore. You ever seen an old queen, Erwin? The type that lef’ their family late in life, tryin’ ta go ta the gay bars in the big city, all wrinkled and sad an’ alone? It ain’t even fuckin’ worth *bein’* an old queen unless ya got money, then you might find some sweet young thing that’ll suck yer dick if ya put ‘im in yer will. But that’s it. An’ here ya have Jacks, an ya know what, Erwin? She’s a damn good woman! An’ you don’t fuckin’ deserve her, or yer girls, because yer a fuckin’ liar who built a life fer three other people based on a fuckin’ lie that you don’ even believe! An’ ya know what that makes you, Erwin? It makes you a fuckin’ coward, an’ a liar, an’ a hypocrite. I’d rather be a fuckin’ faggot any fuckin’ day, so fuck you!”

Levi was thrown against the car door as Erwin swerved into the shoulder of the highway, slamming the brakes. They were out of their seat belts in seconds, Erwin halfway around to Levi’s side of the car by the time Levi managed to open his door and push himself out of his seat.

“What, you wanna fuckin’ hit me now?” He yelled out, his voice swallowed by the emptiness of the night, echoing in the cold light of the stars. Erwin advanced on him and Levi didn’t twitch, didn’t flinch, just let himself be grabbed by his coat, lifted, and slammed back against the car. Erwin was breathing in gasps as he trapped Levi’s body with his own, feet off the ground. They stared at one another, chests heaving, skin washed grey, eyes black in the scant light of a waning moon. Their faces were just inches apart. Levi raised his chin, defiant. Erwin was shaking. They were trapped that way, like dogs with their jaws around one another’s throat, neither willing to be the first to bite down. Eventually, each man’s breath slowed. Levi felt his feet hit the ground, and Erwin stepped away from him, turning and putting his own back against the car.

Levi tapped a new cigarette out of his pack, the other one lost amidst the scuffle, and lit it. Erwin reached a hand over, and Levi obliged him with one of his cigarettes and his trusty Zippo. For a moment, they just smoked, each buried deep in his own thoughts.

Finally, Erwin started, “You gonna tell me ya never had a beard?”

“Didn’t marry any of ‘em. It ain’t fair, Smith.”

“I told ya, I love her. I’ve always loved Jackie. Maybe not in a...maybe not tha way a man loves a woman, usually, but I do love ‘er.”

“Tha’s jus’ it though, Erwin,” Levi flicked the ash from his cigarette, “She married a lie. An’ that ain’t fair ta her, an’ you fuckin’ know it. You been lyin’ so long, you damn near forgot you were lyin’.”

Erwin opened his mouth to speak and shut it again. He was agitated, squeezing his hand into a fist again and again. Levi waited. Finally, in a voice hardly louder than a whisper, he managed to say, “I didn’ know what the hell else ta do. I didn’ wanna leave this place. And there ain’t no room fer queers in the police force.”

“Ain’t much room fer queers anywhere, these days.” Levi agreed. “Look, Erwin, it ain’t like I don’t get it. But doin’ a bad thing fer a good reason don’ make it a good thing. I should know. I done plenty’a bad things. But you got Jacks an’ tha girls up in it, now. An’ it...it ain’t gonna turn out nice.”

Erwin just took a drag and exhaled, the smoke swirling together with Levi’s before slipping away on the breeze.

Eventually, the cigarette butts were tossed in the ditch, and they were back on the road. Erath was just a few miles more, and now that they were finally starting to get closer, Levi felt his curiosity growing. He had no idea what they were about to encounter, but the thought of it was sending thrills of adrenaline through him, despite the depth of his exhaustion.

“I’m sorry I shoved ya.” Erwin muttered as they finally passed the sign for Erath. “But damn, yer a mean lil’ shit when ya got blue balls.”

Levi snorted. “So are you.”

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They arrived at the address, which belonged to a ramshackle white farm house in what seemed to be, quite literally, the middle of nowhere. Calling it Erath was a stretch, considering how far outside of town it was. When they drove up, an officer came running out to the car and Erwin rolled down his window.

“Where we goin’, officer?” he asked. Levi smashed his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Roun’ tha back, Detective. In tha barn. You’ll see tha lights.”

Erwin thanked him and they followed the drive around the back of the house and a couple of outbuildings. Behind all of that, a barn loomed into sight, just as ramshackle and worn down as the house itself. It was illuminated with contractor’s lighting, the bulbs bright enough to trap the barn in a whitish day-glow, the night around it ever deepening against the artificial splendor of the light. Levi sighed.

“Alright. Let’s see what’s got these assholes all excited.”

They parked off to the side and got out, Erwin leading the way and Levi falling into step just behind him. An officer was there to receive them at the open door, and Levi caught sight of the body immediately. She lay in the middle of the barn, fully clothed, her golden hair spread above her like a halo, resting gently on a bed of clean hay, surrounded in flowers. His brow raised.

“Smith, Levi, sorry ta have called ya out here so late.”

“Hey Perez, we’re sorry it took s’long ta get out this way.” Erwin turned and raised his brows at Levi, who surreptitiously scratched his nose with his middle finger. “So tell me, what’re we here for?”

“Well...residents a’ tha house heard a commotion an’ called 911. By tha time we got out here, this’ what we foun’. We wouldn’a called ya’ll, but then we found...well, we found this.” He lifted up an evidence bag. Inside was a small gray man, fashioned from clay, a dopey grin on his face.

Erwin felt like the wind had just been knocked from his lungs. He hadn’t known what to expect when he was called out here, but he sure as hell hadn’t expected this. His mind raced first to Ibis, but they knew she was locked away. Levi cursed viciously under his breath. Erwin sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face, fighting a wave of anger that threatened to overtake him. When he was sure he could trust himself to speak aloud, he said, “We never released images ‘r information about tha clay fig’gers, did we, Levi?”

“We sure as hell did not,” Levi confirmed.

“Tha’s why we wanted ya’ll out here,” Perez confirmed.

“May I?” Levi asked, already pulling on his gloves.

“A’ course,” the officer replied, gesturing toward the body. “We photographed everythin’, so feel free.”

Levi opened his notebook and uncapped his pen with his teeth. He was already scribbling as he walked. The closer he got, the stranger the scene looked. She was laid there with her hands clasped before her breast, wearing a dingy white dress, two shapes (*wings?* Levi wrote) made of feathers and flowers around her. She might have looked peaceful, had her throat not been opened. Despite the violence of a slashed throat, she was completely free of blood, every visible part of her meticulously cleaned. The only blood Levi could find was in a puddle just below her feet. Upon closer inspection, the flowers and feathers looked to be sprinkled with blood as well. *Not victims blood?* Levi scribbled down, lips pressed into a thin line.

He crouched low and stared at her feet, long and hard. They had been visibly scrubbed, abrasively, with what he could only assume to be harsh chemicals based on the blisters. *Feet cleaned pre-death.* Levi lifted her skirt until her knees were exposed, his eyebrows raising at the lividity of her shins and knees. Carefully, he turned her arm and checked her elbows, then lifted her hip as cautiously as possible, so as not to disturb the feathers and flowers.

*No underwear beneath dress, ligature marks at ankles and wrists, lividity at shins, toes, buttocks, and elbows. Prayer?*

“Erwin,” he called, motioning him to come over. “Accordin’ ta lividity and ligature marks, she was tied into a kneelin’ position when he slit ‘er throat. An he washed ‘er feet till she was blistered ‘fore ‘e killed her, too. But she don’t got no defense wounds, so we need a tox report immediately. Either ‘e had ‘er restrained, or she was drugged, maybe both. Anyway, after he slit ‘er throat, he left ‘er that way fer a bit, then ‘e cleaned ‘er up real careful like, then ‘e brought ‘er here.”

“That blood belong ta her?” Erwin asked, gesturing toward the sticky pool below her feet.

“Dunno, but I’m guessin’ it don’t. Perez!”

He walked over to them quickly and nodded. “Yeah?”

“Did ya’ll find any chickens ‘round here?”

“Sure did,” he confirmed. “It’s half-plucked too, we fig’ered tha’s where tha feathers came from.”

“How was it killed?”

“It’s uh...well, it’s neck was wrung, then cut open. There’s a lotta blood.”

“An’ I bet most of it ended up right here,” Levi nodded, gesturing toward the ground. “Neck wrung an’ blood poured out...sounds...sounds Old Testament, ta me.”

“An’ a prayer position...Levi, didn’ ya say Ibis’ whole woodcarving thing was...supposed ta be Satan?”

“Sure did. An’ now we got tha answer ta her blasphemy, I guess. The white dress, flowers ’n’ feathers, Biblical sacrifice, kneelin’ ta pray, feet washed clean...he’s apologizin’, ta God, sure, but ta her also,” he gestured toward the girl. “He’s assuagin’ ‘is guilt. Or she’s assuagin’ hers, if we got another lil’ girl like Ibis.”

Erwin shook his head, covering his mouth with his hand and Levi scribbled. “Perez,” he asked, “Mind if I see that lil’ clay man again?”

“Course not, detective,” Perez replied as he handed the bag over. “Be my guest.”

Erwin examined it closely. Same color of clay, same dopey expression, but where its genitals should have been, the clay man was scraped clean. “Levi, look,” he said handing it over. “It’s junk got scraped off.”

“Whaddya know,” Levi muttered, turning it over. “I think we got a male this time.”

“Why’s that?” Erwin asked, brows furrowing slightly.

“He’s guilty...an’ he’s lookin’ fer absolution any way he can find it.”

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They brought the dogs out, but the trail went cold in a little stream at the back of the property. They found shoe prints, but the shoes had been discarded. They were men's sneakers, beat so thoroughly to hell that the soles were smooth and it was impossible to tell their original color. The body was taken in an ambulance for further examination, and Erwin and Levi finally went on their way.

"You gonna try ta sleep?" Levi asked, lighting a cigarette. Erwin was always impressed by how long he went without smoking when they were on a crime scene, though he always seemed to make up for it afterwards.

"Fig'ger I'll bed down on one 'a them couches in the break room. Yerself?"

"I was fig'gerin' the same," Levi confirmed. "Sun's fixin' ta come up as it is, I don' see as there's any need ta go home. Not at this point."

Erwin was quiet for awhile, then, letting Levi smoke in peace as the sky before them began going grey with the imminent dawn.

As they breezed past the Lafayette city limits, he finally asked, "Levi, honest ta god, did ya see this comin'?"

Levi was quiet at first, flicking his cigarette over the edge of the window, his brows creasing with thought. "I...never really felt like Ibis was tha end of it," he finally muttered, shaking his head as he sucked down another drag. "A...person ain't broke like that in a vacuum. An' I ain't sayin' this whole...cult thing is anythin' more 'n paranoid bullshit, but I can't help but think...there's somethin' deeper in all this, somethin' we ain't quite seein'. An' I dunno if we're ever gonna stop this without knowin'...what that thing is."

"Ya got any leads I should know about?"

"Right now I'm thinkin' a' Nichols an' that alter."

"I told you..."

"I know, we ain't goin' after ol' Nichols without some mighty proof. But it might be time ta...get some proof. One way er another."

Erwin's brows shot up. "Are you sayin'...what I think yer sayin'?"

"We'll see what I'm sayin'." Levi muttered back.

Erwin shook his head. "An' what could possibly make you think I'm gonna go along with this kinda fool madness?"

"Maybe I ain't gonna involve you."

"It's a little late fer than, ain't it?"

“We’ll see,” Levi muttered, shaking his head. “I’m just tellin’ ya right now? I don’t see this getting lighter ‘fore it gets darker. An’ I don’t think it’s right just ta let these women die while we pussyfoot around, tryin’ ta look at every other lead we got.”

“An’ are we lookin’ into every other lead?” Erwin asked. “What about that drug lead ya got?”

Levi was quiet, crushing out his cigarette butt and crossing his arms. “Well,” he finally said, “It might jus’ be time ta’ pull that one off tha back burner.”

“What’re we waitin’ on, then?” Erwin asked, impatient.

“A tox screen.”

“Then lemme know when it’s done, an’ if that meth shows up, yeah?”

“Sure,” Levi replied, hoping that his usual flat tone hid the sinking feeling in his gut.

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There were two couches in the break room, though one was more of a love seat. Levi took that one without being asked, knowing he would fit on it better anyway and too exhausted to argue. He took some spare blankets that Brenda kept under her desk for just such an occasion and handed one off to Erwin.

“Bless ‘er, she thinks a’ everythin’,” Erwin said as he slipped off his shoes. “We got what... three hours ‘till people start showin’?”

“If that,” Levi confirmed, unbuttoning his shirt

“Well, night, then.”

Levi turned out the light and bedded down on the couch, waiting until he heard Erwin’s breathing steady out. Then, every muscle in his body aching, he pushed himself off the couch and made his way out to Nile’s desk. The sun was already rising as he punched in a number he would never forget. He let it ring once, then hung up and called again, this time letting it ring twice. The third time he called, there was barely half a ring before the other line picked up. For a few minutes, they both just breathed. Finally, a little deeper, a little rougher than he remembered, a voice said, “Crash?”

“Hey Einstein,” Levi replied, trying to keep his tone flat despite the rolling in his gut. “How’s it goin’?”

“Same as always,” they replied, but the tone and timbre of their voice betrayed them. Levi wondered if they could read him as easily.

“Listen...” he started, but he stopped, taking a minute to breath. He was all over the place tonight—the scene, the interruption, the exhaustion, the sleep deprivation, Erwin, the murder, Ibis, the clay man—this shit took its toll.

“You okay?” they asked, finally, and Levi shook his head slowly.

“I’m fine, it’s just. There’s some trouble, an’ I’m...I’ve been tryin’ ta keep ‘em off yer trail, but I don’ think I can much longer.”

“I ain’t involved in no trouble, Crash. You know that.”

“Sayin’ you ain’t involved ain’t the same as not bein’ involved,” Levi hissed, that old familiar argument bringing up old familiar feelings that he hadn’t bargained for...not today. “Anyway, I’m warnin’ ya. I don’ have ta warn ya, but I am.”

“Yeah, yeah,” they said, an incongruous laugh filling the silence. “Crash, I’ve missed you. Have ya...have ya been holdin’ up okay down there?”

“I been alright,” he said. “Alright as ever. They still think I’m dead, right?”

“Sure they do, far as I know. But nobody tells me jack shit, ya know.”

“I know,” he confirmed, leaning against Nile’s desk, squeezing his eyes shut in a meaningless attempt to abate their burning.

“When are ya’ll comin’?”

“I can’t say.”

They scoffed.

“It ain’t like that, Einstein, it’s just...I don’t know, an’ I’m still tryin’ ta keep ya out of it, but I can’t much longer. Yer the only one who makes it.”

“Ya’ll are findin’ Pinwheel down there?” they asked with a gasp.

“Yeah, apparently the Angels’r expandin’ their market.”

“I’d fuckin’ say so...”

“That’s all I can tell ya.”

“I get it. Try ta give me some warnin’ ‘fore ya come out here, okay? ‘Specially if yer bringin’ tha Feds.”

“Ain’t gonna be no Feds,” Levi assured them.

A few beats of silence fell between them, and Levi knew that he had so much more to say, but no real way of saying it. He figured they felt the same way, but this shit was pointless. This shit was so fucking pointless.

“Hange,” he finally broke the silence. “Take care’a yerself, okay?”

“Yeah. You too, Crash.”

He heard his name catch in their throat just before he hung up.

## Chapter End Notes

- "Red" is the universal safe word in BDSM circles...thus "Red" means an immediate stop to all activity, and its use is taken very seriously.
- \$300 in '93 is roughly equivalent to \$500 in today's money
- **A personal request: When talking about Levi in this fic, please do not refer to him as "biologically female" or any iteration of that phrase. "trans male" or "trans man" is fine, though. Thank you!**



# The Good-Nite

## Chapter Summary

“Hey there,” Levi offered, lips spread in a lascivious smile, “Partner.”

## Chapter Notes

**Please note: The first few paragraphs of this chapter deal with some talk of a past suicide attempt.** It isn't wildly graphic or anything, but always protect yourself, yeah?

I love this chapter and the next chapter so I'm gonna keep this brief.

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

Levi stared at his own bloodshot eye. He'd caught himself in the sliver of mirror he'd glued to his wall and he'd stayed there, trying desperately to clear his mind of what felt like encroaching madness. She'd been in the edges of his vision, lately, with wings made of chicken feathers and flowers, with her grisly open throat, her blond hair, her hands clasped in prayer. She would stand, lifeless but still somehow burning with light, an angel of vengeance next to Andrew, next to the others. He couldn't see her in this piece of mirror, could only see his own pale skin, his reddened eye. It allowed him to focus, in a manner of speaking.

Talking to Hange, however brief, had made it worse. He couldn't stop thinking of loss, couldn't stop thinking of handfuls of dirt, his own burning lungs, the way Hange's face had been streaked with blood and dirt and tears. He thought of Erwin, Jackie, the girls...he'd had a family once, too. A blond boy with a wry smile, a redheaded girl with eyes like emeralds. Levi reached his fingers up until they found the corners of his mouth, and then he pushed, pushed until he could feel a ghoulish grin, pulled them into a theatrical frown. He remembered playing cards late into the night, the four of them stoned out of their minds, Hange strutting around in leather, Isabel posing with Levi for Farlan's sketches. The memory of it made him want to laugh, but the laugh caught in his throat, tumbling out his mouth all twisted up into a sob. He pressed his hand to his lips, tried to breath through his nose.

It felt like yesterday. It felt like a lifetime ago. It had barely been a year, but Hange's voice made it all too real.

*Hey, Crash, they'd said that night, trying to cover their concern with their usual bravado. Stay the fuck outta my stash, okay?*

He hadn't. Pinwheel was magic. Pinwheel was so, so sweet, Hange's gift to a world that refused them, a drug that found light in the darkness, beauty in the corners of the horrific. He'd taken a pill, and then another, and then a handful, laughing as a wave of euphoria washed over him. Hange had explained to him, once, why Pinwheel did what it did, why it felt so perfect, why it turned every sensation into pleasure, why it colored your perception with magic and beauty, but Levi hadn't paid attention, hadn't cared. And he didn't care that night, either...didn't care how it worked or what it did, didn't care that anything over a normal dose could be quickly and easily fatal.

He didn't remember anything else from that night, didn't remember anything until he woke up in the hospital, Hange passed out in a chair, his handler standing over him.

*It's over, he said, You're out. You wanted out, you're out.*

Levi hadn't bothered telling him that being out of deep cover wasn't the "out" he'd been looking for. It probably went unsaid either way.

That night, lying awake in the cold formality of a hospital room, he'd seen his first ghosts. Blond hair, wry smile, red hair, emerald eyes. He'd thrown up, dry-heaved until his I.V. line ripped out and the nurses came running. Those particular ghosts weren't likely to come to him anymore, not now...sometimes he felt like it was a penance that he could never truly pay, penance for trying to escape the madness and the sorrow of a world he'd never really belonged to. He had no right to escape, to turn his back on it when they had their lives ripped from them so violently. His little freak family.

Hange had come to see him one last time in the hospital. He'd hated them for saving his life, hated them for keeping him here.

*You're a selfish cunt, he'd hissed. Hange had scoffed.*

*At least I'm not a coward, they'd shot back with that sad, incongruous smile.*

He'd begged to be put back on the job. Not undercover, just...working, again. Perhaps to atone, in some strange way, were such a thing even possible. He couldn't kill himself, not again, not directly. He'd hoped for some dangerous assignment, inner city. Instead they'd given him the Southern Louisiana deltas. The most boring place in the world.

Until, of course, Andrew Guitierrez showed up.

A knock sounded at the door, breaking him out of his thoughts. Probably for the better, he reasoned. Those thoughts weren't likely to go anywhere good. He walked over and opened the door, unsurprised to find Erwin there, staring back at him, the smile on his face falling into a look of concern.

"Ya look terrible, you alright?"

“Thanks,” Levi muttered, turning around and walking back toward his living room. “I’m fine.”

Erwin sidled in behind him, closing the door and locking it. “Yer eyes are all bloodshot...”

“Haven’ been sleepin’.”

“You know that ain’t good fer ya, right?”

“Wow, really? Thanks fer lettin’ me know, mom.”

“Seriously, Levi, Pixis already wants us off this case. If yer crackin’, them Bible Thumpers’r gonna know it. An’ they’re gonna have more ammunition ta get rid of us.”

“If we don’ get a lead on this guy soon, they’re gonna oust us anyway,” Levi countered as he crossed into the living room, digging through boxes. He’d told Erwin that they needed to dress casual tonight, yet still he wore a white button-up over his jeans with a green bolo tie at the neck, and what looked rather suspiciously like cowboy boots. In light of that outfit, Levi imagined he would need to shift his own look a bit.

“I’m just sayin’, I ain’t ready ta give up on Cassie Miller yet, an’ since you ain’t neither, I fig’ger we should do our best ta stay on the right side ‘a this thing.”

“I get it, Smith,” Levi said, pulling on a plain black t-shirt and some shabby old jeans.

“That’s good,” Erwin nodded, leaning against the door frame and watching Levi dress. He shouldn’t have, of course, but Levi still refused to talk to him about the...situation...he’d encountered him in a few weeks prior, and it was making Erwin all the more determined to work his way under Levi’s skin. He wasn’t obsessed with his partner, he told himself, just fascinated.

Levi strung a leather belt through his belt loops, the buckle a large, silver-looking thing with a decorative scrolling pattern etched across it. Erwin smirked as he watched him pull on his steel-toe boots.

“Never fig’gered you were the cowboy type,” he said through a smile.

“I’m whatever type I need ta be,” Levi said, “A skill you could stand ta work on.”

Erwin frowned down at his own outfit. “What’s wrong with this?” he asked. Levi shook his head, fighting to keep the corners of his mouth down.

“What’s wrong is that ya look like you,” he said, walking over and eyeing him up and down. “Same dopey bolo tie, same stupid button-up. You jus’ exchanged yer slacks an’ dress shoes fer jeans an’ boots.”

Erwin took advantage of their proximity, pushing himself away from that wall and closer to Levi, who was forced to lift his chin to keep eye contact. “You don’ like it?” he asked, his voice going a bit softer, his eyes fixed on Levi’s.

“No,” Levi offered back, defiance lipping at the edges of his tone. “I think ya look ridiculous.” He pulled away just as Erwin’s hand snaked out to catch him by his waist, dodging the maneuver and pretending not to have seen it. He had seen it, however, just as clearly as he heard Erwin sighing behind him. He’d been pulling shit like this ever since he caught Levi with that Dom a few weeks prior. Levi wished he could say that he didn’t like it, but what his mind accepted as reason wasn’t jiving with the chemistry his body experienced. He felt like there was a rope that connected them, and every long look, every stolen touch, no matter how brief, was making that rope shorter. He feared that, eventually, they would crash together.

“So where we goin’ again?” Erwin asked. Levi thought to himself that he desperately needed to stop getting lost in himself like this. They had a case. That took precedence.

“To a truck stop...an’ a bar. There’s a fuck-ton a’ them lot-lizards there. Las’ time they told me ‘bout Lottie Jenkins ‘fore we even had an ID. Fig’gered they might know somethin’ now too.”

“Solid lead,” Erwin nodded. Levi grabbed up a black leather jacket and his keys. “But when’re we gonna check out tha meth lead?”

Levi walked out of the house and gestured for Erwin to follow him. “Soon,” he said, locking his door behind him. “Let’s see what these girls have ta say, then we’ll plan our next move.

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“Yer gonna at least...try ta let me do the talkin’, right?” Levi asked, brow furrowed as they sat in their car. They were watching the girls get in and out of trucks, trying to decipher who they would approach first. Monica was nowhere to be seen, but Levi was pretty sure he’d seen Betsy getting into a truck. He’d told Erwin they’d do best to wait on her. In the meantime, they sat in their car, front-row witnesses to this parade of desperation, the ever-present supply and the voracious demand.

“I dunno why you insist on actin’ like I don’ know what I’m doin’,” Erwin said, opening a beer. “Like I ain’t never questioned a couple’a prosts before.”

“You ain’t never been undercover,” Levi replied, sucking a drag off his cigarette and reaching a hand toward Erwin for a beer. “An’ I have. So why don’cha stop bitchin’ and let me handle it?”

“We ain’t undercover, though.”

“Nah, we ain’t, but it’ll be better fer us both if tha girls’re tha only ones who know we’re cops.”

Erwin nodded. Despite being overall annoyed by Levi’s patronizing attitude, he could see the wisdom in that. In a place like this, the last thing they needed was attention. The media was all over the case, though they were twisting the Old Testament rituals into some sort of strange pagan tradition. There had always been a thousand rumors floating around the backwoods, rumors of animal or human sacrifice, rumors of cult activities and voodoo

witchery. In Erwin's experience, such rumors rarely had anything at all to do with reality, but they were great for stirring people up. The old church-types clutching at their pearls and demanding that *something* be done about this heathen behavior, organizing prayer vigils and speaking contemptuously of how degraded this city, this state, this entire *society* had become. It was the rock music, the movies, an all-out assault against traditional Christian values.

Erwin wasn't sure what he believed about God, but he knew that evil was real...real, and rarely where one expected to find it. Good people were distracted by all this nonsense while bad people moved in the shadows. And then there were people like Levi. People who communed with the darkness in a way that Erwin couldn't understand. People who let themselves be swallowed alive in order to slay the beast from the inside. The more he learned of Levi, the more invested in him he became. His waters ran so deep, and Erwin wanted to dive inside them, explore the depths of him, pull him apart, lay him open. It was a strange feeling but he couldn't shake it. The more he tried to know him, however, the further Levi pulled away. At this point, he felt like he was following after him helplessly, waiting to be thrown the scraps from his table. And that feeling was leaving him angry...edgy.

"There she is," Levi rasped, then cleared his throat. "Let's go."

"Ya ever thought about cuttin' back ta like...a pack a day?" Erwin asked as they stepped out of the car.

Levi shook his head. "Nope."

Betsy wiggled her hips as she walked inside, offering a smile and a wink to the man who opened the door for her. Erwin and Levi followed close behind, following her to the bar.

"Hey sweetheart," Levi drawled as he came up beside her, smiling like any regular john. Erwin hung back slightly to watch him work. Levi's ability to act still shocked him sometimes, but so did his inability to carry that same act over to personal situations. With a victim, with a suspect, with a witness, Levi was a perfect chameleon. At the office, around the the boys, he stuck out like a sore thumb. Another aspect of him for Erwin to file away.

"You again," she said, rolling her eyes. "It's a busy night, why're ya botherin' me?"

Something slipped from Levi's hand to hers in a gesture so expertly smooth, Erwin almost didn't notice.

"I ain't tryin' ta take away from yer income, honey," Levi nodded, "But my friend an' I need ta bend yer ear a little. How about ya let me buy you a drink?"

She eyed them both, her eyes lingering over Erwin. "Only 'cause yer so nice and yer friend's so cute," she finally grumbled. "Gimme a Long Island and a smoke."

Levi obliged, ordering beers for himself and Erwin, a Long Island for the girl, and a fresh pack of cigarettes. Drinks in hand, the three of them found an empty booth and sat, obscured in the smoke and vague neon glow of the bar signs. An old jukebox pumped out good ol' country tunes in the corner, a rowdy group of truckers took bets on a game of pool, and a working girl danced atop one of the tables. No one gave a shit about the two men cornering

the whore in the booth, and for that, Erwin was grateful. Cigarettes were passed around and lit, drinks were nursed, and finally, the conversation began.

“This about that girl in tha barn?” Betsy asked, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth. Levi nodded.

“Fig’gered ya heard about ‘er by now.”

“Yeah, I did. An’ I damn well shoulda. Cassie was a a friend’a mine.”

“I’m real sorry ta hear that,” Levi said, eyes falling. For mere seconds, Erwin saw the facade slip, saw it in the way his hand trembled as he lifted his beer, in the flash of pain through his eyes. No one else would have noticed, it was over so quickly, but for some reason, in that moment, Levi ached.

There was no room for aching here. He was already on to the next question.

“Did she happen ta mention any new johns? Anyone strange or creepy? Anyone a little too rough ’r religious?”

“Um...she had a cousin in town that I ain’t never heard of.”

“A cousin?” Levi asked, brows furrowed. “A real cousin?”

“I dunno...jus’ said a cousin a’ hers had been put out on ‘is ass, an’ she was helpin’ ‘im find work. An’...” Betsy took a drag on her cigarette, but she was eyeing Erwin with a palpable mistrust. Finally, she blew out the smoke and leaned over to Levi, whispering something in his ear. Whatever it was, it made Levi’s eyes widen and his brow raise.

“Betsy,” he started, turning toward her, “Do ya know where she was stayin’? We can’t nail down an’ address.”

“In a hotel off tha I-10,” Betsy offered with a shrug. “Tha Good-Nite Inn. Shitty lil’ dump of a place.”

“Thanks, honey,” Levi said, “An’ I really am sorry ‘bout yer friend. You be careful now, ya hear?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she huffed.

“By the way,” Levi asked as he motioned for Erwin to start leaving, “What happened ta yer friend Monica?”

“People come ’n go,” she shrugged. “Ya know how it is.”

“I do,” Levi nodded. “Thanks fer yer help, Betsy.”

She shrugged and sipped at her drink. Erwin waited for Levi to slide out of the booth, walking out of the bar in silence. They were almost to the car when Levi said, “Hold up, I think I left my notebook in there.”

“Want me to come along?”

“Nah, I can handle it. Call in a team fer that hotel, though.”

“Will do, boss,” Erwin shot back wryly. Levi jogged back inside, and Erwin couldn’t help but notice the electricity in his gait. He looked like a live wire, and he was. There was no Levi like the Levi who’d caught the scent of a trail; Erwin had been working by his side long enough to know that. It was an incredible thing to watch, his gloomy self-destructiveness refocusing itself into the chase. Levi was a detective in a way that Erwin would never be, and Erwin knew it. He was better at bending the system around their indiscretions, but Levi could chase down a case like he’d never seen.

In the car, Erwin pulled out the radio and requested backup and a forensics team to the hotel. He’d need to do some acrobatics in the paperwork to justify this whole thing, but he didn’t mind...not if it meant catching their killer.

A moment later Levi appeared with a glint in his eye, that palpable electricity around him. “Let’s go, Smith! We got ourselves a fuckin’ lead.”

“That we did,” Erwin said with a smile, turning the key in the ignition. “God bless yer lil’ Betsy.”

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The owners of the hotel were, in Erwin’s opinion, the types who were used to harboring shady individuals and turning a blind eye toward undoubtedly illegal activity. It was a small place, just about fifteen rooms, each of which could be rented by the hour or the night. Half the lights in the parking lot didn’t work, and when the official cars started rolling up, Erwin could swear the occupants scattered away like cockroaches. Levi had hopped out of the car and walked straight into the office, but as soon as they showed their badges, any negotiations they could make with the hotel owner ground to a stuttering halt.

“Ya know, mister, you can tell me all ya want about murders an’ girls in barns, but I’m jus’ an old man with a business to run, an’ I’m gonna need ta see a warrant,” the hotel owner said with a shrug.

After twenty minutes of back and forth, Levi looked like he was going to do some murdering himself, so Erwin slid in front of him and offered the hotel owner his brightest smile. “Look, Mr...”

“Clovis.”

“Mr. Clovis, we ain’t tryin’ a disrupt yer business, an we certainly ain’t gonna implicate you in any wrong doin’. We jus’ wanna know if this girl,” Erwin pointed to Cassie Walker’s picture, which Levi had left on the counter, “Was stayin’ here with someone else, and if she disappeared recently.”

“I appreciate that, officer, but yer still gonna need a warrant.”

“An I appreciate that, Mr. Clovis. I know yer jus’ tryin’ ta run herself an honest business an’ I respect that. My father was a small businessman too, so I appreciate what kinda work an’ dedication it takes ta keep a family fed in these hard times.”

“It’s always hard times,” Mr Clovis agreed, shaking his head, “An’ after Hurricane Andrew, our insurance went through the damn roof. I can’t afford people thinkin’ this place is dangerous or full’a angry spirits ‘r some shit.”

Erwin avoided saying that anyone staying at an establishment such as this probably didn’t much care about ghosts. Some things were better left unsaid.

“That’s jus’ tha thing though, sir,” he said, leaning over the counter conspiratorially, close enough to see the salt and pepper hairs bristling off of Mr. Clovis’ ear, close enough to smell his hospital-scented breath. “If’n we can get through here nice an’ quick like, without causin’ no kind of fuss, then we can be done with this ‘fore the press gets involved. Ain’t no reason for nobody ta know why we’re here or even that we were.”

Mr. Clovis nodded slowly.

“Now, if’n we gotta get ourselves a judge, an’ get him ta sign a warrant, and *then* get back out here an’ look through that room...well, I can’t hardly guarantee who might show up. The newspapers, the TV people...who knows?”

Just like that, he had him. Mr. Clovis frowned up at him. “Ya think...ya’ll can be outta here before the sun comes up?”

“I imagine, but we gotta get started right away.”

“Well...I suppose if yer gonna be quick-like...”

“Yer a good man, Mr. Clovis,” Erwin replied with a smile.

“She was stayin’ in room six. Stopped payin’ ‘er bills one day...I went there an’ all ‘er stuff was thrown around, an’ she was gone. So I cleaned the room an’ rented it out again that night.”

“Can I ask whacha did with ‘er stuff?”

“Kep’ it for ‘er,” he said with a shrug, “Didn’ realize she was murdered.”

“Any chance we can see it? Along with tha room?”

Mr. Clovis stared at Levi for a moment, who was doing his very best to look impassive. Erwin imagined that was the best he could manage at the moment, and Erwin could hardly blame him.

“Yeah. Bring yer guys, I’ll show ya to tha room.”

He pulled the key from it’s hook and shuffled out the front door of his office, Erwin and Levi in tow. As they walked through the parking lot, Erwin waved the techs over, a small team of



them gathered around their cars, smoking away.

“How that fuck didya do that?” Levi asked, his tone somewhere between pleased and annoyed.

“Golden Boy magnetism,” Erwin shot back with a shrug and a smile. “You can handle them prosts, I’ll handle tha Good Ol’ Boys. Deal?”

“I’d take the prosts any day.”

“Here we are,” Mr. Clovis said, waiting for them to catch up. He unlocked the room and opened the door, flipping on the light, which sputtered a few times before coming on with a yellowed glow. “I’ll get the box. Ya’ll get started...an’ get outta here as fast as ya can.”

“You have my word, sir,” Erwin said with a smile, “An’ our thanks.”

“Yeah well, keep yer thanks and get ta work.”

“Ain’t he a sweet thing?” Levi muttered as Mr. Clovis left the room. Erwin grinned.

“You ain’t won any awards fer yer interpersonal skills neither, Levi.”

Levi shrugged and let out a small, “Heh.”

The techs were outside setting up and putting on the suits they wore to gather evidence. Levi and Erwin exited the room, knowing that whatever trace evidence was left, if any, would be invisible to the naked eye...better to let the techs do their job. Mr. Clovis was coming toward the room with a somewhat sour expression and a large cardboard box. “Here it is,” he said, setting the box before them. “I reckon ya’ll can have it. Ain’t no friends er family ta contact ’s far ’s I can see.”

Erwin neglected to say that they would have had to have the box and it’s contents as evidence anyway, opting instead to smile and nod. “Thank ya, sir.”

Mr. Clovis mumbled something and began to walk away.

“One more thing, sir, if’n ya don’ mind?” Levi asked. Mr. Clovis turned and looked at them. “Do ya remember a...man, livin’ here? Toward tha end?”

Mr. Clovis furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Nah. She had...a lotta suitors, ya know.”

“This wouldn’a been no suitor,” Erwin broke in. “A cousin ‘er somethin’. Family-like.”

“I told ya, she ain’t got no family I ever saw.”

“How about a blond? Real light blond, bleached-like?”

Mr. Clovis frowned in thought, covered his mouth with his hand, then shook his head. “Nah, Nothin’ of the sort.”

“Well, we thank ya anyhow,” Erwin said with a smile. Mr. Clovis shook his head and walked away. Levi was already pulling on his latex gloves. Erwin followed suit, watching as Levi opened the box with a slow sort of reverence. The contents had sort of been dumped inside, without any rhyme or reason. Levi clicked on a flashlight and examined what he could see without disturbing anything. There was a hair dryer, a great deal of makeup, some clothing...

“It’d be best if we let the techs sort this, huh?”

“Yeah, ‘cept...” Levi reached into the box gingerly, trying not to disturb anything. “This.”

He pulled his hand from the box and opened it, revealing a small, gray clay man, dopey expression carved onto his face, genitals scraped off.

“I’m pretty sure Cassie’s ‘cousin’ weren’t no cousin.” Levi said, brows raised.

“Well,” Erwin replied, scrubbing his hand over his face as he stared at the little figure, “I’ll be damned.”

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There wasn’t much left to do, not for tonight, not until the techs did their work. Until the evidence was examined and processed, Erwin and Levi wouldn’t really be allowed to see it for themselves. There was nothing left to do other than to go home.

“So ya think they was livin’ together?” Erwin asked as Levi blew a lungful of smoke out the car window.

“Seems ta me they were,” Levi answered, shrugging. “But ol’ Clovis never saw ‘im, which means they was takin’ pains ta keep ‘im hid.”

“Why?” Erwin asked, frowning. “Why was she helpin’ him?”

“Because she knew ‘im.”

“What if he was forcin’ ‘er too? Like threatenin’ her an’ shit?”

“I don’ think so. Why didn’ she ask fer any help? Betsy talked to ‘er after she took in this fake-cousin...”

“You know how it is, maybe he scared ‘er real bad.”

“Nah...she was either tryin’a do ‘im a kindness, or he had somethin’ for ‘er.”

“Somethin’ like what? Money?”

“Drugs.”

“The meth?” Erwin asked. Levi was quiet. “Look, Levi, I’m pretty sure it’s time we chased down this lead. You’ve been puttin’ me off fer months now, an’ I ain’t quite sure why, but I think it’s about time ya stopped. It ain’t....responsible, ta sit on somethin’ like this.”

Levi took a drag, blew the smoke out the window.

“Look, you can keep givin’ me the silent treatment but it ain’t gonna change my mind. You let me help ya chase down this lead or...I’ll go ta Pixis with it.”

“You wouldn’ fuckin’ dare.” Levi’s tone was cold as ice, but Erwin wasn’t going to be dissuaded.

“I would. Listen, I don’t wanna do that, Levi, an’ I don’t know how delicate this shit is fer you, but look at little Cassie Walker or that Jane from the lake or Lottie Jenkins an’ jus’ fucking tell me that we have time ta wait fer another one ta show up? An’ don’t act you don’t have a soft spot fer them prosts. I saw how ya looked at Betsy when she said Cassie was a friend.”

“It ain’t a soft spot ta treat somebody like a human fuckin’ being.”

“Even so. You know as well as I do that we need more info ta find ‘im. He ain’t like Ibis, he takes ‘is time killin’, and until he kills a new one, we ain’t gonna have a lead on where ta find ‘im, and even if we do there ain’t no guarantees. But if ‘e’s a junkie, and we can chase down ‘is supply...we’ve got ‘im. An’ anything less than that is a human fuckin’ sacrifice an’ you damn well know it.”

Levi only smoked in silence, leaving Erwin to wonder why the fuck he was so jumpy about this drug lead. He could speculate, of course, but something told him that the reality of Levi’s time in deep cover went well beyond anything he knew. It wasn’t until they passed Lafayette city limits and Levi had burned through three more cigarettes that he finally spoke.

“Alright,” he muttered. “I’ll...take ya to the source. But it’s gonna be risky, Smith, an’ ya gotta promise me ya won’t go ta Pixis. Not about this. Not ever.”

“Of course I promise,” Erwin said with a shrug. “I imagine you’ll explain tha risks ta me?”

“Later,” Levi said. “Lemme make some phone calls.”

“It ain’t gonna be long, is it?”

“Nah, but yer gonna have ta give me a couple’a days, alright?”

“Can do.”

Levi continued to brood silently for the remainder of their journey, giving only a brief nod when Erwin dropped him off at his apartment. He drove away feeling strange, like he’d asked too much, pushed too far. Levi was...it was hard to place what he was, exactly, but he definitely wasn’t pleased with chasing up this drug lead. Erwin found himself wondering what had happened, exactly, that had gotten Levi out of deep cover, and wondered if he’d ever know. He felt like he was stepping out into the dark, here, without any assurance that he’d find solid footing...nevertheless, they had a job to do, and he couldn’t rightly justify ignoring the fact that Levi was sitting on a potential key that could blow this case wide open. They had to go after the meth. It was the only way they’d catch their murderer.

It wasn't until he pulled into his own driveway that he found Levi's notebook sitting on the passenger seat.

"Shit," he muttered. He wondered if he should just take it to work tomorrow, wondered if Levi would even miss it tonight. The notebook sat there on the passenger seat, its plain black cover belying the secrets that Erwin couldn't help thinking it contained. He nearly got out of the car, nearly walked away, but still it sat there calling to him. It was wrong, of course it was wrong. He reached over and opened it even so. The front page was blank. Erwin breathed, cursed, then grabbed it up to flip through its pages.

There were notes, of course; pages and pages of small, cramped handwriting that filled every inch of space around sketches done in ink and pencil. Some of the sketches were recognizable as crime scenes—Andrew Gutierrez, Lottie Jenkins, the Jane from the lake, the Pan that Ibis had carved on the tree, Ibis herself, and finally, Cassie Walker. He saw a few faces that he didn't recognize: a girl with an enormous, infectious smile, a blond boy who seemed guarded, brooding....similar to Levi himself. And then he turned the page, and his eyes froze.

He was staring at a gorgeously detailed portrait of himself.

Erwin traced his fingers over the pencil lines of his own torso, the angles of his face, his eyes, his arms and legs. Him, bent over his desk at work, typing with his tongue poking out through his lips. *Do I do that?* he wondered silently, flipping the page to see himself again, shirtless and stretching. The picture was so flattering that Erwin couldn't help the smile that jumped to his lips. "Ya fuckin' devil," he muttered, turning to a page of his face from seven different angles. "I never knew you was lookin' so close."

He stared at the pictures for a few more minutes, his breath coming in small huffs, then decided all at once to return the notebook tonight. He told himself that it was for the best, that Levi might need his notes about the case or to record the events of the night. In fact, there were a hundred perfectly legitimate reasons to take the notebook back tonight, none of which had anything to do with the drawings he'd found at all. By the time he'd reached Levi's apartment, he was practically patting himself on the back. What a partner he was, driving across town at this late hour just to return some case notes.

Erwin stepped out of the car and knocked at the door once, and then, after a few moments of silence, he knocked again. He was starting to knock a third time when the handle turned, stuttered, and turned again. Finally, the door swung open, and there was Levi, torso bared, jeans unbuttoned and slung low on his hips, hair a mess. Erwin had opened his mouth to speak but now, confronted with the sight of him, no sound came out.

"Hey there," Levi offered, lips spread in a lascivious smile, "Partner."

"Hey ta you too," Erwin finally said. The initial shock was fading, and a smile was sliding across his lips as well. Without warning, Levi wrapped his fingers in Erwin's shirt, grasping the fabric and pulling him inside. The force of Erwin's weight sent them both off balance and they crashed against the wall, Levi pinned beneath Erwin all small and wiry, all muscle and bone. Somehow they were laughing and for a moment, it didn't matter to Erwin that he'd never heard Levi laugh before, not like this, not loud and full and free...he was distracted by

fingers working open his buttons, by the feeling of Levi's mouth, warm and wet, pressing licks and kisses to his chest, his ribs, his stomach.

"*Fuck*," he moaned, Levi's little kitten-licks finding their way lower and lower as his hands began to go for Erwin's zipper. "Levi, Jesus, what's gotten into you?"

"Like ya haven' wanted this," Levi gasped, breathing heavily, eyes hooded with intention. "Tell me you haven't."

"I can't," Erwin gasped as Levi pulled his zipper down, down, down, the nails of his free hand digging into Erwin's side. "You know I can't."

Levi gave up words, his hand instead snaking inside Erwin's jeans, pushing them aside and down around his hips before he sought his cock. Erwin gasped as Levi found him, already half hard and jumping in his hands. "I'm gonna suck ya dry," he growled, his hand closing around Erwin, "An' then yer gonna fuck me 'till the sun comes up."

Erwin moaned and grabbed him, lifting him up and pushing him up against the wall so hard that his head knocked back against it.

"Sorry," Erwin muttered, but he was already going for Levi's neck with his lips, his teeth, his tongue.

Levi began to laugh, and Erwin chuckled too, his mouth working over the tendons in Levi's neck, nipping and licking, but Levi was laughing harder, now, too hard, and Erwin pulled back enough to ask, "Now what's s'damn funny? Ya ticklish er somthin'?"

Levi's breath hitched and he gasped, clawing at Erwin as if coming back to himself. "No, jus' ....god damnit, Erwin, don't stop..."

And Erwin wanted him, wanted him desperately, wanted his mouth and his hands and the hard ripple of lean muscle in his torso, his arms, his legs, but Levi's face looked wrong, his eyes wide and manic, a grin stretched across his features in a way that didn't make sense. Erwin felt something sudden and cold wash over him, like a bucket of ice thrown right in his face. He frowned.

"Levi?"

"C'mon, ya big stupid piece of shit, *come on*," Levi was practically whining, practically moaning, rubbing himself against the wall. It was all wrong. Everything was wrong. It crashed over Erwin, a brick wall of revelation, and he frowned.

"Levi, what the fuck are you on?" He asked, grasping Levi's face in his hands, peering into his eyes. "What'd ya take, ya stupid lil' shit?"

"I ain't stupid, cuntrag, yer fuckin' stupid. Aren't ya? Don'tcha wanna fuck me? Ain't that what ya wanted this whole damn time? An' here I am so fuck me, god damnit, Erwin, *Erwin*" Levi was beating his fists against Erwin's chest now, his giggling euphoria quickly fading into anger, frustration.

“Ya wanted to fuck me, you stupid faggot, wanted ta shove yer cock down my throat, didn’ ya? Here’ I am, Erwin, c’mon, *fuck me*.”

“No,” Erwin said, cold, trying to push himself away, “Yer high, an’ I ain’t fuckin’ you high.”

“But it feels so good,” Levi moaned, rubbing himself against Erwin, grinning again, all wrong.

Erwin opened his mouth to speak and then, frustrated, sighed, “C’mere.” He hefted Levi up, half-carrying him to the kitchen despite his protestations. Levi twisted and hit at him with rough, uncoordinated blows, but Erwin kept moving him closer to the sink. Finally, Levi landed an elbow in his ribs and Erwin nearly dropped him. “God damnit,” he spat out, grabbing at Levi’s hair. “Stop yer fuckin’ wigglin’.”

“Fuck you!” Levi yelled at him, scrabbling against his arms.

“Settle the fuck down.” Erwin managed to keep ahold of Levi with one hand and flipped on the cold water with the other. He grabbed at Levi, trying to maneuver him closer to the sink, but he wasn’t having it. After dodging Levi’s hands and taking a painful knee to the thigh, Erwin growled, grabbed him by the hair, and forced his head down. He thought he heard a moan, but when he splashed the ice cold water on Levi’s face, that ended abruptly. Levi coughed and spluttered, fighting against him, but he splashed his face again. Levi let out a string of profanities that would have made a sailer blush, arms swinging wildly, and still Erwin splashed him again.

“Jesus FUCK,” he half yelled, knuckles connecting with Erwin’s cheekbone. Erwin fell back, cursing as Levi cried out, “You crazy fuck, what tha hell’re ya doin’?”

“Tryin’a make ya come ta yer senses.” He felt tired, worn in a way that seemed impossible after the euphoria of only moments before.

“Whaddya mean? Why wouldn’ ya fuck me?”

“Because you’re fucking high as a god damned kite, that’s why,” Erwin nearly yelled back, his voice rising, angry. “I don’t want you like this.”

Levi looked a bit shocked, his manic look fading. It was as though he was seeing Erwin for the first time that night, all at once. His lips turned down, his brow furrowed, and he asked, “Why...why are you here, Erwin? Why did you come here?”

Erwin rubbed his hand over his mouth, then rubbed at his eyes and sighed. Finally, he replied, “Ya left yer damn notebook in my car. I came ta give it back.”

“Oh,” Levi muttered, leaning back against the counter, unsteady, “Well then get tha fuck out. I was tryin’ta enjoy myself, ya know.”

“Yeah, I can fuckin’ tell.” Erwin shot back, anger bubbling from his guts.

“Yeah, an’ ya fuckin’ ruined it.” Levi eyed him, angry. “I said...” he started, but Erwin held his hands up in mock surrender.

“I’m goin’. See ya, Levi.”

Erwin was almost out the front door when he heard the unmistakable sounds of Levi retching. He was going to leave. He was leaving. Just a few more steps before he’d be out that door. But Levi retched again, and something inside Erwin dropped. He couldn’t just walk out that door. With a deep sigh, he leaned back against the wall to take a moment to breathe. Sure he was wound up. Of course he was angry but...he couldn’t leave. Not like this. He turned and walked back toward the kitchen; there was Levi, shaking and miserable, throwing up into the sink. He placed a gentle hand on his back and rubbed small circles between his shoulder blades.

“I’m here,” he murmured softly. “I’ll take care a’ ya.”

# Ramifications

## Chapter Summary

Some part of him remembered Erwin—his voice, his arms, his lips—but it felt like a dream. Why had he been here? Levi wondered vaguely if he'd been the one to call him, but that didn't seem right, he wouldn't have been so careless, so stupid. He wouldn't have just *done that*.

## Chapter Notes

Wow WOW AUHG the response to this fic has been overwhelming in the best possible way!!! Thank you so so SO much everyone!

First of all, tumblr user absinthianlyunheroic made [this gorgeous fanart](#) of Ibis!!!! I was blown away by this. If you want a great visual for her, please check this out. absinthianlyunheroic also made this [lovely picture](#) of Levi, because you really can't get enough visuals of Levi tbh. We also have awesome [fanart of Erwin reading Levi's notebook](#) by the incomparable xyuwa. I fucking love this art, esp. the bonus of Levi's adorbs little teenage-girl style love scribbles. Perf. Tumblr user thepinkviolence submitted [this gorgeous art](#) to my tumblr. Amazing colors and I love Erwin's dadly hairs! And the fantastic kyoheichou drew [this really badass portrait](#) of Levi, complete with ill-fitting suit and snarky expression. I think it captures him perfectly.

WOW, GUYS, can you see why I'm blown away? Incredible. I just want to take this time to thank every one of you for all of your comments, kudos, art, tumblr messages, and etc. Every single one means so much to me. My readers are fucking amazing, so pat yourselves on the back. :)

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [wolpertingersandwhiskey](#).

Enjoy!

Sun streamed in through the window. He dared not open his eyes, pain already rolling through his head, pounding and chipping away at his temples, the back of his skull. He was warm...too warm. Hot, in fact. In the slurring confusion of waking, several seconds passed before he registered the press of another body, the hot blow of breath on the back of his neck, the heaviness of a limb slung over his side. When the realization hit, however, it hit hard.



*Erwin.*

Levi's back was turned to him, but he recognized the golden band of his wedding ring, the lay of his hair against the skin of his arm. That was all Levi could see of him, and he was fine with that—if he couldn't see him, his presence here in Levi's bed didn't quite feel real. Breathing deeply to steady his pounding heart, he tried to remember what had happened. Erwin had dropped him off at the house, of that much he was sure. After he was sure Erwin was gone, Levi had slipped the two tablets of Pinwheel that Betsy gave him under his tongue until they dissolved, had let the euphoria of them lick up his limbs until he was consumed by it. After that point...well, the rest was a blur.

Some part of him remembered Erwin—his voice, his arms, his lips—but it felt like a dream. Why had he been here? Levi wondered vaguely if he'd been the one to call him, but that didn't seem right, he wouldn't have been so careless, so stupid. He wouldn't have just *done that*. A pit of dread was forming in his gut, but he wanted to ignore it, wanted to pretend that he knew the answer to the question that pressed at the back of his mind. Nevertheless, he found his hand snaking down, confirming what he suspected.

He was nude.

He struggled to pull himself from Erwin's arms trying desperately not to wake him in the process. Once freed, he moved about the room as silently as possible, trying to locate his underwear and, most importantly, his packer. Normally, he lived in the thing...wore it daily, slept in it, never really let himself be caught without it. In fact, the only time he took it off with any regularity was when he was showering. He'd never been in a place where being anything but stealth was an option, so he'd built up the muscles in his chest to make his scars near-invisible, and never risked getting caught without his cock firmly in place. Yet here he was, sleeping naked, his partner spooned around him, packer nowhere in sight.

Levi's heart was pounding, his fingers shaking. With lead in his belly and a sandpaper tongue he slipped upstairs, making his way to the bathroom. He threw open the door and stopped, the sight before him stopping him cold. There, hanging over the curtain rod, he saw Erwin's clothing, as well as his own. It was damp, clearly washed the night before, and rather stained. His eyes drifted to the corner by the sink where he saw socks, underwear...and his packer, nestled safely in it's harness.

He was going to be ill. A million scenarios played themselves out through his mind but he had no solid memory of the night before, of what had occurred after the Pinwheel melted beneath his tongue. He didn't have to know the exact sequence of events, however...the consequences were the same. Erwin had seen him this way. Had undressed him, it would seem, and Levi wasn't even sure he'd been conscious. He certainly hadn't been capable of providing any explanations. He was going to be sick.

Stomach convulsing, he pulled his cock into place, digging in one of the drawers with trembling fingers for a fresh pair of underwear. His pants and shirt from last night were too damp to wear, but he wasn't going to make it back downstairs without retching. Resigned, he pulled on his briefs and stood over the toilet, fighting the bile that threatened to rise up his throat, his limbs shaking. He was aware of nothing but the pain in his gut, the roaring in his

ears, the burning of his eyes—so when a warm hand pressed into his back, he threw an elbow sharply without checking to find its source.

There was Erwin, doubled over, hand clutching his gut, wearing nothing but a pair of Levi's boxers. The boxers were tragically small on him and left very little to the imagination, which might have been amusing under other circumstances, but right now, Levi wanted to punch him, wanted to run. He felt like an animal cornered in a cage, his heart pumping, breath coming in gasps.

"What tha fuck," he gasped out, "What tha hell're ya doin' here?"

Erwin was still trying to get his breath back; Levi's elbow seemed to have winded him, but Levi didn't really care.

"I didn' call ya," he said, but it came out more like a question. "Did I? So why're ya here, Erwin?"

"I," Erwin started, wincing, "You don' remember?"

"No, I fuckin' don't," Levi spat back, grabbing a towel to cover himself up. It didn't do much good. Erwin had *seen* him; now he couldn't stop feeling naked beneath his glare.

"I came ta...bring back yer notebook. Ya left it in my car."

"And why tha hell didya do that?"

"Fig'gered ya might need it..."

"An' then?"

Erwin looked at him, opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned. "Ah...maybe ya need ta calm down a little bit, now."

"I ain't gonna calm down, you stupid piece of shit," Levi's voice was rising, and Erwin was looking around as if someone might hear them.

"Just...shhh, Levi, c'mon, I'll tell ya what happened but ya gotta fuckin' chill,"

"I jus' fuckin' told ya I ain't gonna chill! So fuckin' tell me why tha hell I woke up naked this mornin'! Tell me what tha hell you were doin' in my bed! Tell m-..." but Levi was dry heaving again, spitting up bile. He felt the burn of it across his already-ravaged throat, tears stinging his eyes, and this time when that cautious, warm hand pressed circles into his back, he didn't strike out.

"Levi," Erwin's voice was deep, calm in a way that Levi felt like he could sink into. "Just breathe. I ain't goin' anywhere."

It took awhile, but eventually the heaving stopped. Erwin went downstairs and returned with a glass of water, which Levi drank down in gulps.

“Slow down, hoss,” Erwin urged, “Yer gonna make yerself sick all over again.”

“Will ya please put yer clothes on,” Levi croaked out, “An’ tell me what happened?”

Erwin’s clothes were still damp, but he pulled them on anyway as he replied. “Ya left yer notebook in my car, so I brought it back to ya. But by tha time I got here, you was...ten kinds’a fucked up. I didn’t know it at first and...and I kissed you. But I fig’gered it out an’ told ya I wouldn’t do nothin’ else with ya in that state. Then I was fixin’ ta leave, but ya got sick, an’ I didn’t want ya drownin’ in yer own vomit ‘r nothin’ so I stayed an took care a’ you.”

Levi nodded, his head spinning. He didn’t know what to say, how to react, so he kept his face as stony as possible as he asked, “An’ why was it that I woke up...in bed with ya? Naked?”

It was then that Erwin looked down and away from him, crossed his arms. “Uh, well, you, ya know, you threw up on yerself an’ ya jus’...you were upset about bein’ dirty an’ I was hopin’ a shower might...sober you up and clean us both up so...”

“So ya stripped me down an’ put me in tha shower?” Levi finished for him. Erwin scrubbed his hand over his face.

“Well...yeah, more’r less...”

“And what happened when...when ya saw me?”

It wasn’t a question that he wanted to ask. There were certain things he could surmise, after all, Erwin was still here and had somehow ended up in bed with him. He’d seen people like Erwin call people like himself animals, freaks. Had it been any other man he’d met around here, Levi was at least mostly certain that he would have been left to drown in his own vomit. Erwin...well, he’d stayed, hadn’t he? Still, a part of Levi didn’t want to know. A part of him wanted to walk out of his front door and never look back, leave this case and this Erwin Smith behind him, and just *go*. There wasn’t anything good to come of this, that much was clear, whatever this twisted thing between them was. And now, this...

He’d never intended for Erwin to know. Of course, he’d fought his own feelings, his own hunger, but there had always been a part of him that rested in the knowledge that his own sense of self-preservation would keep him from letting things get out of hand. But even if, even *if* he had decided that it was safe to tell Erwin the full story behind those hormone shots, it would have been on his own terms.

That had been taken from him, and he wasn’t even cognizant enough to remember it.

“Ah...um,” Erwin started, sticking his hands in his pockets, pulling them out, clasping them together and, finally, crossing his arms. Levi was pummeled by a wave of shame so strong that he almost turned around and walked right there. Honestly, he wasn’t sure why he didn’t.

“I jus’...um...well, ya sorta took over an’ told me you was...born this way an’ had a sex change ‘er sumthin’ an’ told me if ya caught me starin’ or askin’ too many questions ya’d kick my ass.”

*A sex change or something.* Levi doubted that was what he'd actually said, but it didn't seem like he was going to get more out of Erwin right now. Jesus, he wished he could drop dead.

"And?" Levi asked, gut twisting.

"I cleaned ya up an' dried ya off an' ya wanted me ta...ta come ta bed with ya, so I did."

"An' we didn'..."

"I told ya, I don' wanna fuck you like that."

*Like that.* Levi felt his cheeks grow warm. He cleared his throat, nodded, and turned back toward the stairs. Erwin didn't follow him.

Putting on his clothes was the work of a moment. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, where he was going to go, only that he really, really needed to get out of his house and away from Erwin. He grabbed his notebook off the counter, the notebook that had started all of this, if Erwin was to be believed, and walked out the door.

From an upper window, Erwin watched him leave with a heavy sigh.

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In damp, stained clothes and with an exhaustion headache looming large, Erwin stepped into his house. It was quiet, Jackie at work and the girls at school, and for that he was thankful. He stripped down, threw his clothes in the laundry, and dry-swallowed a few ibuprofen. In the kitchen, he took a few swigs of milk right from the jug and dug up a protein bar for breakfast. He considered making coffee, but he was running late enough. Brenda would have some brewed up in the break room anyway. As he chewed the protein bar, a piece of paper on the counter caught his eye.

*Erwin*, it started, Jackie's handwriting sloppy, hurried. *Come home tonight. We need to talk.*

Erwin groaned. He hadn't been home much lately, and when he had come home, it had just been to sleep. This case, Levi...the whole damn thing was running him ragged. Couldn't she understand that? Erwin felt another wave of exhaustion roll over him and he rubbed a hand over his face. How was he supposed to juggle all of this? Levi's sharply pointed words about how he was already hurting Jackie rolled back over him. Of course he'd been right, he'd been right about all of it.

But it was hard to focus on that, now, hard to focus when he was still reeling from last night. It was all a blur, now, and he felt strangely ashamed of himself, as if he'd transgressed against Levi in a way he couldn't change or take back. It wasn't his fault...he didn't know that Levi was...that he was...not...Erwin wasn't sure what to call it. Only that last night, when he'd helped Levi undress, he'd come across what he only knew to describe as a prosthetic. Levi had looked at him, fierce and more cognizant than he'd been all night, and said, *Look, dumbass, I was born with a hole 'stead of a pole. That's why my body don't make tha right hormones. I'm a guy, same as you, I jus' had ta get some surgery an shit ta get there. An' if I*

*catch ya staring too long or askin' too many questions, I'm gonna kick yer sorry ass, do you understand?*

And Erwin hadn't really understood, hadn't really been sure what to say or how to react, but he'd understood enough to know he needed to keep his eyes off Levi's junk and not talk about it, and regardless, there were bigger fish to fry at the moment. So he'd helped him wash up, helped him dry off, helped him into bed and then, when Levi had turned toward him and said, *Please, don't leave me here alone*, Erwin had curled up in bed with him. Levi had melted against him, pressed into him, sighed, and then, after a few moments of breathing, Erwin had felt tears roll down his arm from the place where Levi's face rested.

"It's alright," he'd whispered in Levi's ear. "I won't leave, I'll be right here when ya wake up."

"Ya won't leave this time," Levi had corrected him. "But ya will leave."

Erwin hadn't known how to reply to that, so he ran his fingers through Levi's dark hair, marveled at how soft it was, at how it brushed across the paleness of his skin. Erwin felt so enormous laid down like that, so he swallowed Levi in his arms and tried to hold the pieces of him together. Eventually, they both slept.

It felt like he'd gone to sleep in an alternate reality, and woken back up in his own. Now his wife was mad at him, Levi had run off to god knew where, and he still had one hell of a case to deal with. The case...

It dawned on him that the hotel, Mr. Clovis, all of that had happened just last night. It was already nearly eleven in the morning, and he was sure the techs were still processing evidence, but he needed to get in and talk to Pixis. There were sure to be more questions than answers at this point, and if Erwin wasn't there to answer them, he couldn't do any damage control. With a whispered *fuck* and a low groan, Erwin finished his protein bar and grabbed his jacket.

The first thing he noticed when he pulled into the station was that Levi's truck was nowhere to be seen. His guts felt leaden as he turned off his car and pressed his forehead into the steering wheel. When Levi had looked at him in that bathroom today, there'd been something in his eyes...something animal. Erwin thought about his secret, thought about how he'd not remembered anything about last night, and felt a sudden wash of concern. What if Levi had just...left? What if he'd decided that it wasn't worth it to stick around, that the stakes were too high? The thought of never seeing him again left Erwin cold, and it was everything he could do to make himself walk into the station instead of starting the car back up and driving off to search for Levi.

As soon as he walked in, of course, he was accosted by questions.

"Smith! Where ya been?" Nanaba asked.

"How'd ya know about that hotel room?" Ness was next, brow raised.

"Where's yer fuckin' partner, and where the hell were you?" Nile sneered.

“Woah, ya’ll, I need some coffee first,” Erwin said, tossing back a deceptively easy smile. “It was a long night, ya know.”

“Get yer coffe an’ come ta my office,” Pixis broke in, the usual easiness of his expression lost in a frown. “I hope you’ve got a story fer me, Smith.”

Erwin nodded, flashed Pixis a smile, and strolled to the break room. Mike was the only one inside, and as Erwin came in, he took a good, long whiff. Erwin tried to ignore that, opting instead to fix himself a cup of coffee. Mike stared at him.

“Ya’ll had quite a night last night,” he finally said. Erwin paused mid-stir and looked up at him.

“Yeah, who’da thought we’d find ‘er hotel room,” he said, looking up at Mike, searching his face for intent.

“You know that ain’t what I’m talkin’ about,” Mike said simply. His expression was stony, but there was something in his eyes that made Erwin hesitate, something like a plea.

“Well then, I ain’t sure what yer talkin’ about, exactly,” Erwin replied slowly, setting his coffee mug on the counter.

“Look,” Mike started, his voice dropping low. “I’m tha only one that knows about you, Erwin. An’ I known for a long time because ya show up ta work every once and again smellin’ like trees and beer and cum and other men and I...I ain’t never said nothin’ ‘cause I fig’ger it’s yer business, but this...”

Erwin didn’t know what to say, wasn’t sure how to react. Mike might as well have just taken his legs out from under him, might as well have punched him right in the guts. He stared at him, mouth open, and Mike returned his stare with his usual steadiness.

“Erwin, seriously...what the hell’r ya doin’ with him?”

Erwin drew in a long breath, trying to steady himself, trying to find his footing. His hand clenched into a fist, his teeth began to grind together, his stomach clenched as he replied, “Mike, I don’t know...what the fucking hell you’re talkin’ about.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, crossing his thick arms, “Ya do.”

Then Erwin was on him, grasping his shirt up, pulling their faces within inches of each other. Mike’s hands were up, and Erwin didn’t raise a fist to punch him, but when he spoke, his voice came out like a slap.

“You keep yer weird fuckin’ theories to yerself,” Erwin practically spat out. “It ain’t like yer own relations are exactly office appropriate.”

Mike just stared at him, his eyes big and brown, and murmured, “Yeah, hoss, but I ain’t hurtin’ nobody.”

Erwin felt suddenly ill, and he let go of Mike, who smoothed his shirt, turned, and walked out of the room without another word. He took a minute to breathe, took a minute to get his bearings and pull an easy-going face on. With his most charming self perfectly in place, he walked out into the office and headed toward Pixis' office, making sure not to look at Mike. He let himself into the room and sat down in one of the chairs before the large oak desk, tossing Pixis a smile.

"Sorry I'm late, sir, it was one helluva long night last night...as ya seem ta know."

"I know ya'll found some kinda lead, so why don't ya tell me about it?"

"Alright," Erwin nodded. Pixis pulled out a flask and took a swig, gesturing for Erwin to go on.

"Um well, Cassie Walker was a workin' girl, as you know."

"Yeah."

"An' well, we foun' some friends' a hers, an' they told us she was stayin' at a hotel with 'er... cousin."

"A real cousin?"

"Nah. Well, the frien' wasn't sure."

"An' would this frien' be willin' ta testify or look at a lineup er somethin'?"

"Uh...well, she never actually saw tha cousin, jus' heard about him. But she told us where ta look, so we called a team in. I haven't gotten a chance ta find out what they found, yet, but we found one a them clay men in her things. Like tha one at tha crime scene...with 'is junk scraped off. Seems ta be somethin' of a callin' card."

Pixis nodded, took another swig off the flask. "Alright. Then where's yer partner?"

Erwin didn't hesitate. "Oh, Levi had somethin' of a family emergency ta tend to. So I told 'im I'd handle the evidence today an' call 'im if anythin' promisin' came of it."

"Levi has a family?" Pixis asked with a small smile.

"Everybody got some kinda family," Erwin replied, shrugging. "Anyway he's just a phone call away if we need 'im. I fig'ger I got it in hand fer now." He thought about Levi calling him a liar and, for the first time, felt as though it might be true.

Pixis nodded, and Erwin stood to leave.

"You ain't dismissed yet," Pixis said. Erwin sat back down. "Erwin, what're tha chances of ya'll solvin' this before this time next week?"

Erwin frowned. "Chief, we're makin' headway, but this guy's gone underground. An' I can't answer ya fer sure without knowin' what tha evidence is, so...I'm waitin' on tha techs, same

as you.”

Pixis nodded. “I ain’t tryin’ ta rush ya, Smith, but Nichols an’ his crowd’re startin’ ta get involved. An’ they’re botherin’ me about...gettin’ his big brother ta commission a special group ta investigate. They don’t wan’t ya’ll on this case.”

“Why?” Erwin asked, leaning forward in his chair. “Why don’t they want us, specifically, on this case?”

“I aint speculating,” Pixis said with a shrug, “But I’m an old man, Erwin, an’ I wanna retire in peace. So stop screwin’ around and get this case solved. An’ then take a fuckin’ vacation fer awhile. I imagine that wife a yers’ll thank me.”

There was no use in arguing, and Erwin knew it. He nodded, got up, and left the room without another word.

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“I sure hope ya got somethin’ good for me,” Erwin said as he walked into the lab, all business and caffeine energy. One of the techs lifted her head and smiled.

“Smith, are ya really gonna come in here makin’ demands?”

Erwin cringed. “I ain’t makin’ demands, Netty, I’m jus’ havin’ a shit day an’ I was hopin’ ya’ll would brighten it fer me.”

“Oh, well, in *that* case” Annette said with a smile, “Where’s yer that little storm cloud partner a’ yers?”

“Family ‘mergency,” Erwin shrugged.

“Alright, well, I know he’s gonna be on my ass about this evidence, so I’m expectin’ you ta tell ‘im what I’m telling you.”

“I get it, Netty.”

“Well, we didn’ get too much. There was trace amounts’a blood in the room, but he’d bleached it pretty good. Still, I think ‘e opened ‘er throat in the tub. We did find this, though...” She held up a bag, then placed it against one of the dark countertops for contrast. It was one bleached-white hair, about six inches long, with a dark brown root.

“Shorter hair’n Ibis had,” Erwin nodded, “Same bleached shit. I still don’ get it...ya’d think a guy like this’n would be noticeable. Bleach blond hair, pale skin, probably tha same creepy ass blisters Ibis had, an’ yet nobody seen him nowhere.”

“Underground creatures keep ta themselves,” Annette shrugged. “You’ll find ‘im, if ya start turnin’ over rocks.”

“That’s the next step,” Erwin nodded.



Annette looked around and said, “Smith, I left somethin’ out in mah car, lemme walk ya out, huh?”

“Yeah, sure,” Erwin replied, picking up on the significance in her gaze. They walked out toward the parking lot, Annette waiting until they were well away from the building before she began to speak.

“Has Pixis talked to ya’ll about tha governor?”

“Governor Nichols?” Erwin asked, stupidly.

“He’s tha only one we got, right? Anyway, he’s puttin’ tha thumbscrews on us.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Well, he said any evidence we find, we gotta give ta you *and* his team. They’re movin’ in fast, Erwin.”

“Did ya give ‘im what ya got?”

“I showed ‘im tha hair and talked about tha blood, but there’s one more thing...”

Erwin arched a brow. Annette pulled a bag from her pocket and pressed it into his hand.

“If ya got a private lab contact...nows the time ta call ‘em.”

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Half an hour later, Erwin sat in front of the station, staring at the baggy in silence. It contained one small, white tablet. He might have thought it was candy, what with it’s almost-shiny exterior and the small, orange pattern pressed into each side. The pattern looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. Annette had told him that she’d found it under the bed, but had pocketed the baggy instead of cataloguing it because it looked like nothing else she’d ever seen before. He wasn’t sure what to think about the tab, but he was grateful for her intuition. He was going to have to get this to Levi.

That was, of course, if he ever found Levi again.

He kept running through the events of that morning again and again, but nothing that he could do would be able to change it. He could only hope that Levi would come back, that he hadn’t split town for good. With a sigh, Erwin pushed himself out of the truck, and headed inside. He had a veritable mountain of paperwork to complete before the weekend, and he had to get it all done in time to be home for dinner, or Jackie might actually kill him.

He managed to avoid the shoptalk and the litany of questions that he was sure to find from the rest of the crew, opting instead it sit at his desk and radiate his best “fuck off” vibe. It was unlike him, sure, but since he’d ostensibly been chewed out by Pixis earlier, no one seemed to want to bother him anyway.

The more he typed, the more he thought about Levi, his mind oscillating between concern and the memories of last night with a regular rhythm. Eventually, he couldn't help but remember the way Levi's body felt, pressed against his, the way his lips burned against Erwin's own, the way his body felt so small and strong when he shoved him against the wall...and, though fantasizing about their shower felt wrong, the thought of Levi's body spooned into him was making him sweat. He wanted to knock on Levi's door, wanted him to answer like that again, all disheveled and half-dressed, wanted to feel his fist grabbing into his shirt, wanted to slam him into the wall, press into him, wanted to kiss and lick and suck and bite him...

And Erwin realized with sudden clarity that he was sitting in his chair, in the office, his cock already half hard as the other detectives and secretaries milled about. This could not be less appropriate, and yet here he was. He cleared his throat and began pounding away at the typewriter, trying to focus on the report, which was already riddled with typos, but it was no good. His mind was full, and none of this was helping.

Finally, around four, he gave up and grabbed up his coat and brief case.

"If Pixis asks," he muttered to Brenda, "Tell him I had to run by the lab again."

"You can count on it," she offered back with a smile. "And...Erwin?"

"Yes?"

"Is my boy okay?"

"Oh, Levi? Of course....course he's fine. Just some family stuff, needed a long weekend."

She nodded, and Erwin smiled at her and went on his way.

He had an hour until Jackie would expect him home, and he intended to use it. First, he drove to Levi's apartment, but Levi's truck wasn't there. He tried the door, but it was, of course, locked. He spent the next forty-five minutes driving aimlessly about Lafayette, dropping by the few places they had been together, but there was nothing. As five o'clock came and went, he realized he needed to get home. He would try again later.

He pulled up into his own driveway, and immediately the door slammed open. Stephy and Evey came running toward his car, and Erwin clambered out, grabbing up one of them in each arm and twirling them around. "Hey princesses!" He said, laughing as they tackled him down in the grass of the front lawn. "How're mah girls?" They talked over one another, each eager to tell him about their days, about their friends, about the tiny dramas that made up their lives. Erwin felt a kind of relief there, rolling in the grass, burying himself in their tales.

"C'mon, girls, time ta wash up fer dinner," Jackie called out. Then, as Erwin stood and looked at her, she added, "Well, look who showed up fer dinner! Surprised you could carve out a slot in that busy schedule a' yers fer yer family, Erwin Smith."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Jacks," Erwin said, sheepish. She pressed her lips into a straight line and nodded.

“Yeah, okay, Erwin,” she said, and for a moment, she looked strange, different from how Erwin had ever seen her, almost like she was about to collapse in on herself. He couldn’t define it, it was in the lines around her eyes, in the set of her jaw, the line of her lips, skirting the edges and never quite settling in...but then she was back, she was pulling the girls into her arms and walking into the house, and Erwin followed behind them. He watched the back of their heads, his girls bouncing around his wife, their excited chatter broken up by Jackie’s smooth, calming voice, and he felt utterly stricken.

*...here ya have Jacks, an ya know what, Erwin? She’s a damn good woman! An’ you don’t fuckin’ deserve her, or yer girls, because yer a fuckin’ liar who built a life fer three other people based on a fuckin’ lie that you don’t even believe!*

Levi’s voice echoed in his head and all at once, Erwin couldn’t really breathe. He pressed his back against the wall of the mudroom as the three of them made their way down the hall, toward the kitchen, and tried to calm his beating heart. What was he doing? He had a family, he’d had everything under control, Jackie never would have known about the men in the woods. But what about when the girls were gone? What about Jackie’s needs? Levi’s words about old queens in gay bars had hit close to home for a reason. He loved Jackie, but not the way he should have. Not the way he was supposed to. He considered the memory of Levi’s body, the hard planes of lean muscle, the storm cloud grey of his eyes, the warmth of him curled into Erwin’s chest, and felt at an utter loss.

“Erwin?” Jackie called from the kitchen.

“I’m comin’,” he called back, pulling off his shoes in a hurry. “I’ll be right there.”

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After dinner, Erwin had started to help Jackie clean up, but she’d waved him away. “Who knows when we’ll get this much time with you in a single day,” she’d said pointedly. “Go spend time with yer girls. I can wait.”

So he had. They’d played in the back yard, Erwin pushing them on the swings and chasing them around in a wild game of tag. Eventually, it was bed time, and Erwin brought them inside and let them each pick a book to be read. The girls shared a room with bunkbeds, but they’d somehow all crowded into one for storytime. With Evey curled into his left arm, and Stephy curled into his right, Erwin read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *Where The Wild Things Are*. Every sound effect or funny voice he made elicited a slew of giggles, and the occasional tiny fist beating against his chest. Halfway through the second book, he began to get sleepy, and so did the girls. He didn’t mean to doze off, but they had, and everything was warm and simple in a way nothing had been in a very long time.

Half an hour later, Jackie woke him gently, and he managed to get himself out of the bed and lift Stephy up to the top bunk. Jackie turned on a nightlight, and Erwin flipped the overhead light off and shut the door behind him.

They got to the kitchen and Jackie opened a beer for each of them, gesturing for him to sit down at the table.

“Jacks,” he started, but she cut in.

“Erwin, why don’t ya tell me where ya been goin’? Ya didn’ come home las’ night, you’ve barely been home in the past two weeks...an even before that.”

Erwin swallowed down a swig of beer and frowned. “Jacks, this case is probably tha biggest shit I ever been put on. Las’ night we had ta question some folks, and then we had ta go out to a crime scene. It took all night. It’s tha job, baby, there’s nothin’ I can do about it.”

“Oh yeah?” Jackie said, pursing her lips together, “Because ya know, I do talk ta tha other wives. Marie says Nile never works all night long.”

“Nile,” Erwin scoffed. “Nile don’ do half tha work I do. Why d’ya think I wanted a transfer? He’s a lazy old shit, an’ he ain’t been put on this case. I was.”

“This *case*,” Jackie said, shaking her head.

“Tell me about it,” Erwin agreed, drinking to the notion. “Look, baby, this case won’t last forever, but they’re tryin’a get us taken off it so they can hand it over to some Bible thumpers. There’s somethin’ wrong an’ they know it, an’ they ain’t wantin’ ta get caught. So they’re houndin’ us an’ we’re working ‘round tha clock ta solve this thing. But...but if we can’t get it done in a week, here, they’re gonna take us off it...an’ then...an’ then I can take a vacation. An’ we can head up to yer parents or somethin’.”

Jackie laughed. “Like I wanna spend vacation with my parents. Let’s go ta New Orleans.”

Erwin smiled. “Yeah, let’s go ta ol’ New Orleans.”

They were quiet for a moment, each drinking their beers, and Erwin wished that he could recapture the warmth and simplicity he’d felt just an hour ago, reading silly books to his girls, falling asleep curled into a too-small bunk bed. Sitting here with Jackie, lies rolling off his tongue just as easy as anything, Levi’s accusations burning beneath his skin...

“Erwin,” Jackie broke his thoughts, clasping her hands together and sitting back against her chair. “I...I just have ta tell ya...if there’s someone else...if yer...seein’ someone, I...I need ta know.”

Erwin felt like the wind had been taken from his lungs, but he found the presence of mind to shake his head, to say, “Jacks, no...I’m not seein’ anybody. Jus’ tha job. And she’s a cruel mistress, ya know?”

“I know,” Jackie said, pressing her lips together, her eyes getting watery. “I jus’ ...well.”

“Well, what?” Erwin prompted.

“Well, I jus’ feel like ya ain’t mine anymore.”

Erwin didn’t know what to say, so he stood, moved to his wife, and wrapped her up in his arms. She curled into him, then stood and wrapped her arms around his waist. Erwin kissed the top of her head and tried to ignore the way he felt like he was breaking in two.

Just as he began to pull back from her, the doorbell rang.

“Who the hell is that? It’s ten o’clock on a Friday night...” Jackie asked, rubbing furtively at her eyes.

“I dunno, but let me get it,” Erwin said with a frown. He made his way to the foyer, his stomach tightening up in knots. He thought it might be pranksters, thought it might be a neighbor or something, but when he opened the door, his stomach dropped straight to the floor.

There, grey eyes bloodshot and rimmed in red, stood Levi. He wore tight black jeans, a biker’s leather vest, a tank top underneath.

“Hey Smith,” he said, “Get yer shit. We’re goin’ ta Arkansas.”

# Gethsemane

## Chapter Summary

Erwin watched as the moonlit countryside rolled by, wondered what it would be like in Arkansas, wondered at this mad scientist who wasn't a boy or a girl, wondered if what they were doing was madness or righteousness. Levi had said that doing a bad thing for a good reason didn't change it being a bad thing...but maybe, sometimes, bad things just had to be done. He had no idea how he was going to justify this one in the paperwork, but if they were able to pull it off, it might not matter. If they were able to pull it off, Pixis might not care how they did it.

That was what they were banking on, anyway, and it was a hell of a gamble.

## Chapter Notes

Buckle up, kiddos. I'm working on Ch. 15 of this fic right now, and it's looking like it will have between 18-20 chapters total. I'm also moving in slightly less than two weeks and starting school on October 2nd. I am planning to try and finish this fic before school starts if I can, but I might not. Luckily, I am almost 3 weeks ahead, so hopefully, there won't be any interruptions in the publishing schedule. I can't make any guarantees, except one: it's gonna be a hell of a ride from here on out.

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

Enjoy!

Though their talk had mollified Jackie somewhat, she still wasn't pleased when Erwin said he'd be gone for the weekend. He was quite sure she'd not have let him go, except that Levi was there. As it were, Erwin packed some clothes into a bag while Levi convinced Jackie that yes, they really needed to go, and taught her the cover story, just in case the department called wanting to know where they were.

An hour or so later, they were on the road, taking Levi's truck instead of the official department car. This time, being undercover wasn't just a good idea, it was necessary. When they stopped at a gas station outside of Lafayette, Erwin handed the baggy with the tablet to Levi. Levi looked at it and sighed. "Well, I was plannin' on tellin' ya on the drive anyway," he muttered.

“Tellin’ me what?” Erwin asked.

“It’s a long story. Go get us some coffees and snacks fer the drive. It’s gonna be six’r seven hours.”

Erwin obliged, picking out a selection of chips, candy, and snack cakes, a few waters, and a couple of sodas. The clerk gave him a bag to contain it all, and Levi came in to pay for his gas just as Erwin was helping the clerk pack it all up.

“Jesus,” he said, a small smile on his face. “Ya heard me say six’r seven hours, right? Not six’r seven days?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Erwin shrugged and carried the bag out as Levi plopped a twenty on the counter. “I get hungry.”

They got back on the road, the headlights cutting through the light fog as Levi drove a little too fast up the interstate.

“So,” Erwin started, gesturing toward the glove compartment. “Whaddya have ta tell me about that lil’ tab?”

“I suppose ya ain’t never heard’a Pinwheel...” Levi said, glancing over to scan Erwin’s face for signs of recognition. “No? Alright. It’s gonna be a long story, so I’m glad ya brought yer snacks.”

“Har, har,” Erwin said, popping a Cooler Ranch Dorito in his mouth. “Go on already.”

“Well, that little orange symbol on tha tab there? That’s why it’s called Pinwheel. There’s only one person in tha whole world that can make it. They invented it, they make it, an’ that’s it. Tha Angels...tha biker gang I used ta be involved with, they distribute it.”

“Like...tha *Hell’s* Angels?”

“Used ta be, but they didn’ wanna share their Pinwheel, so they broke off an’ became their own thing.”

“I didn’ know tha Hell’s Angels’d let ya jus’...break off.”

“Well, a lotta blood was shed.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, well. Anyway, Pinwheel is sorta...sorta like ecstasy. Ya heard’a that one, I fig’ger.”

“Yep.”

“So it’s like that but...I dunno, it’s different. Ya don’t wanna move around as much, it’s more mellow...like jus’ real euphoria. An’, fer most people, there ain’t many adverse affects. It ain’t even addictive, in the physical sense, but mentally...it’s like...there’s nothin’ like it. An’ when ya take it, everythin’ is so beautiful, an’ so perfect. It’s like yer one with the world around you, an’ ya jus’...feel like that’s who ya was meant ta be. An’ everythin’ that

happens, no matter how bad, feels jus' fine. When I was sent undercover, it was ta fig'ger out what tha hell tha stuff was, who was makin' it, an' how it was gettin' around. An' that's... that's how I met Hange."

"What kinda name is that?"

"It's just their name. Anyway, they're a...like a mad scientist, kinda."

"Who's they?"

"Hange."

"There's more'n one?"

"No, there's jus' one. But they use 'they' instead'a...any other words."

"What? Why? What's that mean?"

"Hange ain't a boy, and they ain't a girl. So they can't be 'he' or 'she', so they're 'they'."

Erwin was quiet, trying to figure out what the hell Levi was talking about. Finally, he said, "Yeah but...but yer born with'a...with one 'er tha other, ain't ya?"

"Never made much difference fer me, did it?" Levi shot back, his tone getting strained.

"I...well...but you..."

"But nothin'. I'm tellin' you privileged fuckin' information, Smith, I'm tellin' you about one'a tha most elusive, most mysterious drugs in tha entire fuckin' nation, a drug that a lotta people've died for, an' all you can think about is tha genitals'a tha one who makes it. Don't ya think that's kinda fucked up?"

Erwin frowned. Yes, when Levi put it like that, it sounded pretty fucked up. He was still trying to wrap his head around the concept of someone not being a boy or a girl, but Levi pressed on anyway.

"Now, this Pinwheel...when I was with tha gang, they was only sellin' s'far as Pine Bluff. Now though, this shit's showing up all tha way down in the Delta. Now, Erwin?"

Erwin shook his head. "Yeah? Yes?"

"Pay attention, 'cause I done lied ta you about tha meth an' yer gonna be stupid as fuck if ya don't listen up."

"You lied?"

"Yeah, I fuckin' lied. Ya ready fer tha truth?"

"I guess I gotta be," Erwin sighed, wishing he'd grabbed some beer at the store.



“Alright, but don’t freak out.” Levi lit a cigarette, cracked the truck window, and blew a stream of smoke into the night. “The firs’ time I talked ta Betsy, she an’ her friend, Monica... they told me that Lottie Jenkins was settin’ them up with Pinwheel. An’ she was gettin’ it from some kinda weird ‘sex parties’, accordin’ ta Betsy. When Lottie got murdered, the Pinwheel stopped. When Cassie Walker’s cousin started stayin’ with ‘er, the Pinwheel came back. An’ ....a lot of it at that.”

“Cassie was distributin’?”

“To tha girls, anyhow. Seems like they was gettin’ it from their own. Made their ‘dates’ better, ‘specially since tha guys aroun’ here are rough-handed.”

With a cringe, Erwin reached for a cigarette of his own.

“But I think it came from her so-called cousin. Now, Jane Doe, Ibis, Lottie Jenkins, and Cassie Walker all had Pinwheel in their systems, an’ I’m willin’ ta bet our killer has it too... an’ he’s distributin’. Which means he got it from somewhere...an’ we gotta fig’ger out where.”

It all made sense. A hell of a lot more sense than Levi’s first story had, and Erwin more or less accepted it. There was just one thing that was squirming in the back of his head, one thing that was bothering him.

“So...” he started, taking a drag on his cigarette before he continued, “When I showed up las’ night...you was...you...”

“I was on Pinwheel.” Levi confirmed, his voice low. “I got it from Betsy.”

“When?”

“I lef’ my notebook with ‘er on purpose, then went back inside without ya. Oldest trick in tha book.”

“But I thought ya said...I thought ya said it didn’t have no side effects.”

“Well, fer me it does.”

Erwin digested that for a moment, opened his mouth, and closed it again.

“I shouldn’a taken it, I know, an’ I took too much, an’ that was stupid.”

“Well, if ya knew it was stupid...”

“Are you fuckin’ seriously gonna start on that?” Levi scoffed, shaking his head. “‘cause if we’re gonna start comparin’ notes on stupid decisions I can start runnin’ down yer list too, ya know.”

“I jus’ ...why’d ya take it, if ya knew it was gonna...if ya knew you could...” Erwin sighed and took a drag, the silence loaded with the question he wanted to ask, but couldn’t.

“If I knew I could drown in mah own vomit? Is that what yer wantin’ ta ask?” Levi finally offered, resigned.

“Well, ta be honest, yeah. I know ya got some issues but I didn’ think...”

“I ain’t suicidal, Smith,” Levi said, “But...I was, once, an’ I took too much, an I guess it had some...lastin’ effects. I knew some of ‘em, but I didn’ realize I’d have...a reaction like that.”

For awhile, they were both quiet, each lost in their own thoughts. Erwin watched as the moonlit countryside rolled by, wondered what it would be like in Arkansas, wondered at this mad scientist who wasn’t a boy or a girl, wondered if what they were doing was madness or righteousness. Levi had said that doing a bad thing for a good reason didn’t change it being a bad thing...but maybe, sometimes, bad things just had to be done. He had no idea how he was going to justify this one in the paperwork, but if they were able to pull it off, it might not matter. If they were able to pull it off, Pixis might not care how they did it.

That was what they were banking on, anyway, and it was a hell of a gamble.

His thoughts reaching fever-pitch, Erwin finally said, “So, ya gonna tell me tha plan fer Arkansas, or am I jus’ s’posed ta sit on my hands an’ wait fer you ta need rescuin’?”

Levi snorted a little and shook his head. “Well, thing is, these Arkansas boys think I’m dead.”

“An’ how you think they’re gonna take ta you bein’...not dead?”

“Well, I imagine they’re gonna be...surprised, at first, an then mighty suspicious. I’m bankin’ on the fact they ain’t gonna kill me right away because they’re gonna wanna find out what the hell I’m doin’ there. But it’s gonna be...” he trailed off, then drove with his knees while he lit another cigarette. “Smith, this is crooked police work, an’ crooked work ain’t safe. So I jus’ want you ta know that, if it gets bad, you remember yer girls an’ Jackie, an’ ya leave me here ta sort out mah own shit, you understand?”

Erwin had no idea how to respond. He’d understood that they were heading out into unknown territory, had understood that it could be dangerous, but Levi was talking a level of life-or-death that went beyond what they had to expect on the job, generally speaking. A part of Erwin surged up in protest, but he wasn’t really sure how to respond...was Levi being dramatic? Or were they really heading into a situation that was more likely to get one of them killed than to end in the successful capture of their suspect? All at once, Erwin regretted pushing so hard for this drug angle. He hadn’t known—how could he have?—yet now they were heading into the valley of the shadow of death, and Erwin couldn’t claim to ‘fear no evil’.

“What...what’re tha chances’a makin’ it out alive?”

“Who the fuck knows,” Levi shrugged.

Erwin let that digest, and felt suddenly ill. “Why is it ya jus’...decided ta take this route now? How come yer suddenly willin’ ta put yer life on the line?”

“Somebody told me...anythin’ less would be a ‘human sacrifice’,” Levi shrugged. “An’ I’m dumb enough to agree.”

“Do ya....do ya have a plan? Outside’a jus’ showin’ up an’ hoping they don’t kill ya?”

Levi sighed. “I gotta talk ta Hange, an’ then I’ll make one. Oh, an’ Erwin?”

“Yeah?”

“Ya better start usin’ mah undercover name.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s Crash.”

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Levi didn’t speak much, and for that, Erwin was grateful. He’d never had this much put on his plate at one time, and he was still reeling from it all. After weeks of stagnation, everything was suddenly moving at light speed, and he needed a chance to breathe. They smoked together in silence as they drove up the interstate, passing the occasional, lonely car. Erwin never had been much of a smoker but he had nothing better to do, now, and the snacks he’d bought earlier had lost all of their allure. It wasn’t until after their second stop, just north of the Arkansas border, that Erwin turned to Levi and said, “I’m...I’m sorry about yesterday.”

Levi was quiet, dragging away on his cigarette and looking resolutely straight ahead. “Yeah?” he finally said. “Why’s that?”

Erwin felt itchy, uncomfortable. Surely Levi knew why he was apologizing, did he really need to make him say it? “I jus’...I’m glad ya didn’t choke ta death on yer own vomit, but I’m sorry I...surprised ya in tha mornin’, and I’m sorry I...saw you. When ya didn’ want me to.”

“Forget about it.” Levi replied stiffly.

“I don’t want to.” Erwin’s voice was soft, the words just sort of slipping out, unplanned.

Levi replied by squashing his cigarette butt in the ashtray and lighting another. Erwin wanted to ask if he’d even heard him, but he knew that he had. About the time he figured that was all he was going to get, Levi finally said, “Smith...whatever ya need ta do, however ya need ta do it, I need ya to forget about...about this. About all of it. I need ya ta stick me in whatever mental category you keep fer Mike or Ness or hell, even Nile, an’ I need ya to keep me there. An’ don’t...don’t ask me why, because you know why. I need ya focused fer this mission’a ours, an’ then I need ya to just...stop. Can ya do that?”

“Can you?” Erwin shot back, his stomach turning.

“Somebody’s got to, near as I can fig’ger.”

And of course, Erwin didn't want to admit to Levi that he agreed, but he knew that he was right. He had his girls, he had Jackie, not to mention his job. It was a comfortable life he had made for himself, but all the comfort in the world didn't change the fact that it was a lie. The reality of Levi, the sharp-tongued honesty of him was so searingly genuine that it left Erwin breathless, like he'd just been shocked awake from a long, languid dream. And in many ways, he had. Putting his head back down on that pillow, closing his eyes, it wasn't going to work. Truth was, no one could force themselves back into a dream once they'd been awoken. It just wasn't possible.

Finally, Erwin shrugged and said, "Well then, you first."

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A few hours later, Erwin jolted awake with a yell.

"Calm down, hoss," Levi muttered. "It's just a damn pothole. These dirt roads don't take too kindly ta bein' traversed. Never have."

"Sorry," Erwin muttered, rubbing one hand over his eyes, his mouth. "I didn't mean ta go ta sleep on ya."

"S'alright," Levi shrugged. "Gave me some time ta think an' anyway, yer mouth breathin' is kinda soothing."

Erwin couldn't help the smile that stole over his lips, then, and he thought he might have caught a smirk from Levi. It was hard to tell in the darkness. "Where we at?" he asked with a yawn.

"'bout a mile off, now, an' about an' hour offa sunrise."

"Fantastic." They were driving through woods so dense that Erwin couldn't see the moonlight, everything was black as pitch. "What is this place we're goin' to, exactly?"

"Hange's place. It's like...part house, part science lab, part...well. It's jus' Hange's place. I used ta live here, fer awhile."

"Ya lived with h-...them?"

"Good job," Levi said. "Yeah. We was pretty close, back then."

"How close?" Erwin asked, his curiosity piqued by Levi's tone.

"Close, ya fuckin' nosy old queen. What're ya plannin' ta write my biography or sumthin'?"

Erwin smiled again. Levi's acerbic nature had somehow been restored to him, and oddly, it felt nice to have an insult slung his way. It felt...normal.

A few minutes later they were pulling up to something that Erwin could only think to describe as a "complex". In the middle of a clearing, a log cabin loomed enormous...not a homespun middle-of-nowhere log cabin, either, but the type Erwin had only seen on glossy

magazine covers in the grocery store checkout line. Several buildings squatted around the house aimlessly, each larger than the last, all of them made of greying, weathered wood. The contradiction of the glamorously faux-rustic cabin and its genuinely rustic outbuildings was strangely disquieting, as if they were the products of two separate worlds with nothing shared between them.

Erwin thought to himself that Levi must be really getting to him, then, but there wasn't much time to consider the oddity of his own musings, not with the monsters that were hurtling themselves down off the porch, hackles raised, barking with such ferocity that it sent a jolt of fear straight through him. He'd never been afraid of dogs, but these two could take down a bear if they wanted, he was sure of it.

"Calm down," Levi said, "They might kill ya if ya weren't with me, but since ya are, ya got nothin' ta worry 'bout."

"Wow," Erwin muttered, "Amazin' how you set a man at ease."

"Yeah, well, jus' lemme be tha firs' one outta the truck, okay?"

But before either of them could get out of the truck, a high-pitched, squealing noise rose up from outside. The dogs went silent and turned their heads toward the sound, but Levi just shook his head as he put the truck in park. "There they are," he muttered, "Jus' like I remember."

A second later, a person appeared on the porch, their grin so big that Erwin could see it from where he sat. Levi stepped out of the truck and, once he'd shut his door, Erwin followed.

"Crash!!" The figure on the porch yelled at the top of their lungs. In a place like this, there wasn't anyone around to hear anyway.

"Hey there, Einstein," Levi said, looking off to the side. Erwin couldn't tell if he was averting his face because he was embarrassed, or because he was smiling. Hange rushed down toward them, long hair going every which direction, manic grin painted over their features. The dogs got to Levi first, jumping all over him with excited barks and sloppy licks.

"Sonny! Bean!" Hange yelled, "Off! Off! Ya'll know he hates bein' kissed..."

But they didn't listen to their own advice, slamming into Levi so hard they almost knocked him into the grill of the truck and pressing as many kisses onto his cheeks as they could before Levi muttered, "God damnit, Hange," and smacked them away.

"Crash, goddamn, it's been too long...ya look so cute, look at you! Oh my god, I didn' 'spect I'd see you again, an'," but they were tearing up, and Erwin looked away. He felt like he was trespassing, somehow, like he'd been pulled into a world where he didn't belong and frankly, where he wasn't welcome. The dogs wandered over to him and he let them sniff him before he began scratching behind their ears.

"Don' be rude, Crash, introduce me to yer friend," Erwin heard Hange prompt. Levi, who's face was a shade pinker than usual, cleared his throat and nodded.

“Ah, Hange...this is Erwin. He’s mah partner. He’s workin’ tha case with me.”

Hange hummed and stepped over to Erwin, extending their hand. Erwin took it, and was shocked at the crushing pressure of Hange’s handshake. His shock must have registered on his face, because they were laughing at him already. “Pleased ta meet ya,” he muttered. Hange nodded.

“You too, big man. I’ve heard all about you...”

Erwin’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Ya have?”

“No, are you kiddin’ me?” Hange laughed again, “Crash don’t tell me nothin’ no more. Anyway, ya’ll come up ta tha house. I’ll get ya somethin’ ta eat.”

Erwin had tried to imagine what someone might look like if they weren’t a boy or a girl, but he figured he wouldn’t have been able to conjure up Hange no matter how long he might have tried. They had long, messy auburn hair, a muscular build, an ambiguous chest, large hands, sharp features, and their gait was more swagger than walk, even here in the grey light of the pre-dawn, even in what appeared to be blue striped pajamas. Erwin followed behind the other two, watching as Hange leaned down toward Levi and muttered conspiratorially. It was sinking in, finally, that he was in Levi’s world now, and that he had no idea what that really entailed.

The three of them made their way up to the house, the dogs following behind with wet, heavy breath and lolling tongues. Hange let them in, standing in the doorway and forcing Erwin to press past them. He wouldn’t have thought much about it, except that they looked him right in the eyes as he passed, their lips turned up at the edges, but the smile not reaching their eyes.

“’S’cuse me,” Erwin muttered, passing through the doorway.

“Yeah,” Hange replied, “Sure.”

Then they were bouncing back to Levi, leading the way into their spacious kitchen. The log cabin was just as impressive inside as it had been outside, with soaring ceilings, top of the line appliances, and big, comfortable furniture. It looked like more house than one person could possibly need or, for that matter, afford. Then again, Erwin figured, if you were the only person in the world who could make an in-demand drug, you could probably afford whatever luxuries you desired.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Hange half-sang out, moving around the kitchen with an energy that defied the numbers on the clock or the rays of the slowly rising sun. “Who wants some breakfast?”

Erwin remained quiet, listening and watching as Hange and Levi discussed a litany of names and circumstances. He tried to follow along as best he could, but most of it was lost on him. So he simply took the generous helping of eggs, bacon, and pancakes when it was offered to him, drank his coffee, and let his eyes settle on Levi. He was letting Hange do most of the talking, grunting out an answer here or there, but there was something between them that was

difficult to describe, and he wanted to—needed to—understand it. The best way he could categorize it was a note of chemistry, a suggestion in their talk and movements of something beyond a shared past. Levi had said that they had been “close”...watching them, Erwin was at least somewhat sure that he knew what kind of “closeness” Levi had been referring to.

Erwin found his thoughts drifting to nothing in particular while he ate, the lack of sleep and his own mental and emotional exhaustion catching up to him. It wasn't until Levi stood that he snapped back to attention.

“Einstein,” He said, “I’m gonna go...out to tha woods.”

Erwin caught significance in his tone and furrowed his brows. “Is it safe?”

“He’s fine,” Hange said quickly. “He ain’t goin’ far.”

“I’ll be back an’ then...we got some plannin’ ta do.”

“Yeah, sure do. Say hi for me, will ya?” Hange said, their tone softening abruptly.

“Yeah,” Levi muttered, then he was moving toward the door. Erwin stood as well and, despite a reproachful look from Hange, followed him. He got as far as the porch before Levi turned and snapped, “Look, Smith, I need ya ta leave me alone fer a bit, okay?”

Erwin frowned. “Where’r ya goin’?”

“Just a little bit into tha woods. Don’ fuckin’ worry about me, alright? Ain’t no one aroun’ here ta hurt me.”

Erwin searched his eyes for a moment, but they were blank, almost cold. He finally shrugged and gestured toward the yard. “Fine, but try not ta be gone too long. I don’ think yer friend here likes me much.”

“They’re suspicious’a yer kind,” Levi shrugged. Erwin wondered what “his kind” was. “But ya better make nice. You could stand ta learn a thing er two from that one. Anyway, they’re more’r less tha only one I got left.”

With that, he walked away. Erwin’s eyes followed him until he disappeared into the woods, but he didn’t go after him. Levi wanted to be alone, he’d made that clear, and Erwin didn’t care to impose.

Back in the kitchen, Hange was putting away food. Erwin wandered back over to the table, but before he could sit down, they said, “Hey, Big Man, wanna make yerself useful? Wash up them dishes while I put this shit away.”

“Alright,” Erwin agreed easily. Sitting still might drive him insane at this rate, anyway.

For awhile, they were silent, Erwin focusing on washing the dishes, and Hange putting everything back in order. Eventually Hange made their way over with a towel and began to dry the dishes and put them away.

“He talk about me at all?” Hange finally asked.

“Not before today,” Erwin muttered. “But he said you was close. Before.”

“Close,” Hange nodded. “We were. Real close. He said you weren’t so bad. Not ’s bad ’s tha others, anyhow.”

“Well,” Erwin pursed his lips, “Tha’s pretty high praise from tha likes’a him, I fig’ger.”

He went on washing dishes, but Hange had stopped moving around. They were just staring at him now, and Erwin could feel the weight of their gaze bearing down on him.

“Ya know why he lef’ the undercover thing?” Hange asked, their eyes boring into him.

“Too much heat?”

“Sure, that was part of it.”

“Yeah, well, Crash don’ tell me anythin’ ‘till he’s good an’ fuckin’ ready.”

“Yup,” Hange nodded. Erwin figured from their expression that their experiences with Levi were no different.

“He says yer a family man.”

Erwin set down the plate he was washing and turned off the taps. He stripped his gloves off and put them over the edge of the sink, then turned and locked eyes with Hange. “You goin’ somewhere with this?” he asked, “Because, far as I know, I’m only out here ta solve this case. An’ as...titillatin’ as my personal life may be ta you, It don’t got nothin’ ta do with why I’m here, or anythin’ else that concerns you.”

“Right,” Hange said. “Big man don’t have a shit lef’ ta give about nothin’ but ‘is job. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If that’s how ya wanna view it.” Erwin shrugged. “But truth is, the shits I got ta give got nothin’ ta do with you.”

“Did ‘e tell ya ‘bout Izzy an’ Farlan?”

“Nope.”

“Interesting.”

“Are you gonna tell me ‘bout Izzy an’ Farlan?”

“Nope.”

“Alright then.” Erwin moved to put his gloves back on, and Hange pushed away from the countertop.

“I’ve gotta make some phone calls. Feel free ta take a shower or crash on tha couch.”

“Ya know how long Crash’ll be?”



“He’ll come back when ‘e does. If this goes down the way I ‘spect it might, ya’ll are gonna need yer rest.”

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“Where are you?” Levi whispered feverishly, fervently. It was becoming a mantra, repeated again and again as he rocked back and forth, knees pressing into the grass. At some point, Hange had marked their graves with headstones, Isabel’s made of white marble, Farlan’s of black. They were not inscribed, but Levi remembered the order that they had buried them in that night. It made sense, either way; Isabel shone like a god damn lighthouse, Farlan was a creature of the shadows, like Levi.

*Where are you, where are you, where are you?*

The first time he’d seen their ghosts, broken and bloody and bullet-riddled, he’d been ill. Eventually he came to accept their presence in his life, the way they stood over him at night. His terror at them ebbed, giving way to a vague sense of longing, then to a crushing need. Cruelly, it was then that they faded. It was slow at first, Isabel showing up without Farlan or Farlan without Isabel. Eventually he would push himself from another sleepless doze only to find the moonlight cutting across an empty floor. At first Levi assumed he was getting better, at first he assumed that the effects of his overdose were simply abating. But as Isabel and Farlan disappeared, new ghosts came to take their places. Levi found himself wishing for the mangled bodies of his friends, especially when Andrew Gutierrez showed up.

Stupidly, he’d assumed that they would be here. That somehow, they were actual spirits who would haunt the places where their bodies lay. He hadn’t wanted to believe that he would see them again, but the idea of it made him hunger nevertheless. Levi was an atheist, a realist, the glamor of the so-called supernatural held no sway over him. Yet when he couldn’t keep his grip on time or space, when reality turned into so much sand and slipped through his fingers, it was almost possible to believe in things like energies that could haunt a place, turning the invisible into the corporeal.

“Well,” he finally said aloud, “I guess not then. Guess I’ll jus’ talk to yer bones like a god damn madman.”

He huffed out a sigh, rubbed at his own dry eyes aimlessly, bit at his lips.

“I dunno why I even came here,” he muttered, “This is fuckin’ stupid. It ain’t like yer ever gonna know I was here or...an anyway yer both dead ‘cause a’ me. That ain’t changin’.”

His fingers reached out, rested on the white marble of Isabel’s headstone, so cool to the touch that he almost jumped at the feel of it.

“I shouldn’ be here.”

The words caught in his throat and he stopped, scrubbed his hand over his mouth.

“Ya’ll should.”

The whole of him ached with protest as he laid himself down in the grass, his body stretched out between theirs. Though he could feel a burn at the back of his eyes, no tears came; perhaps he had nothing left to give. "I dunno if I'm gonna make it." His voice was so quiet, he couldn't be sure that he'd spoken aloud. "I always wondered what it was, to find yerself in tha garden'a Gethsemane." The barest hint of a smile curved over his lips.

"But we all know I ain't no saint. None of us are."

His eyes slipped closed and he breathed in the dewy morning air, the green notes of spring, let the sounds of a world coming to life roll over him. Isabel had loved the spring, Farlan the summer. And though they all complained of winter together, Levi and Hange and Farlan and Isabel, it was those quiet nights when the snow fell too heavy to ride, too heavy to party, too heavy to make mischief or run drugs...it was those nights that the four of them had the world to themselves. Passing a pipe, dissolving tabs of Pinwheel under their tongues, laughing and letting the whole crazy cruel world around them melt away.

His hand clenched the grass. His eyes burned and burned. The sun was up now, dappling the world around him in golden morning light. Finally, he wept.

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By the time Levi made it back to the house, it was nearing noon. He'd managed to catch sleep at irregular intervals, the world fading out for a bit before the he came around, confused and angry until he got his bearings and dozed off again. He told himself that staying there wasn't going to help anyone, but it was the grass and dirt that finally sent him inside. He needed to get clean.

Hange was waiting for him in the kitchen, scribbling away in a notebook with one hand, the other wrapped around a mug of coffee that, from experience, Levi knew would be cold, forgotten despite being cradled in their hand. That was just Hange. The floor creaked, and their head snapped up. At the sight of him, a grin spread across their face, and they gestured for him to sit down.

"Dammit, Crash," they said, "Do ya know how fuckin' good it is ta see ya?"

"It's good ta see you too."

"Now I jus' have ta hope this ain't tha last time I see ya, huh?" Their laugh was tense, forced.

"I can't make no guarantees," Levi shrugged.

"Why?" Hange asked. "Why're ya doin' this? What's tha fuckin' point? You coulda stayed with me, ya know. I'd'a taken care of ya, you know."

Levi snorted. "C'mon, Einstein. Ya know they would'a done sniffed me out eventually. An' then they'd'a killed me an' done god knows what ta you."

"They can't hurt me," Hange shrugged, "I make the Pinwheel."

“Yeah, you’re the golden fuckin’ goose,” Levi sighed. “But they ain’t always reasonable. If they was, Farlan an’ Izzy’d still be alive.”

Hange sighed, picked up their coffee and took a sip, then frowned as they realized that it’d gone cold. Levi let out a soft *heh* and shook his head. “You never change, do ya?”

“Do you?” Hange asked, looking at him. “How long’s it been, huh? You replaced me yet?”

“None a yer damn business.”

Hange nodded, drew a spiral on the paper before them.

“Did ya call ‘em yet?” Levi asked, back to business.

“I got ahold a’ Teddy. He said they’d be partyin’ tonight, a’ course. They’ll be at the bar from whenever ta whenever.”

“They don’ know I’m comin’, do they?”

“Nah, fig’gered it’d be better if they didn’ show up here. You plannin’ on goin’ alone?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna have Erwin hang out, an’ he ain’t gettin’ involved unless I need him.”

“Crash, darlin’...yer gonna need ‘im. Or yer gonna need someone. You really gonna trust him?”

“He’s mah partner,” Levi said, as if that were the only answer that really needed to be given.

“Yeah, I know that, but I jus’...it ain’t like he’s one of us.”

“You don’ know shit about him, Hange.”

They lifted up their hands, discolored and stained from chemicals, calloused and rough... hands that Levi knew intimately, or that he had, anyway. Hands changed, cells were replaced. He hadn’t let Hange touch him since the night they buried Isabel and Farlan.

“Look,” he said, itchy, uncomfortable. “I need a shower.”

“You know where to find it.”

Levi nodded, stood, and made his way out of the kitchen.

“Ya want company?” Hange called after him.

“Stay put, Four-Eyes,” Levi called back. He heard them laugh behind them, but the sound rang hollow.

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Erwin awoke slowly, his mouth bone-dry, his head pounding. His eyes slid open, and as he took in the rustic room around him, he remembered where he was. He considered the rich

golden light that poured in under the curtains and the stiffness in his neck and surmised he'd been asleep for the better part of the day.

"Fuck," he muttered as he pushed himself up from the couch. Wherever Levi had gone, he sure hoped he was back by now. He still didn't know what was going on tonight, or fuck else about this fool trip to Arkansas. What the two of them were meant to do against a biker gang that had taken on the Hell's Angels was well beyond what Erwin could conceptualize, but he trusted that Levi had at least some kind of plan in mind. The way Erwin saw it, he had to. All that doom and gloom shit was just Levi being Levi.

With a stretch and a yawn he made his way to the kitchen, where Levi sat with a cup of tea, brooding over his sketchbook.

"Mornin'," Erwin muttered. "Did ya even bother sleepin'?"

"Yeah. We ain't all Rip Van Winkle, old man. I been up fer hours now."

Erwin smiled and moved toward the fridge, digging around until he found bread, cheese, mustard, and some ham that still smelled good. "Wanna sandwich?"

"I'm fine."

"Yeah? How're ya gonna pull off them wild plans a' yers on a' empty stomach?"

Levi frowned. "Well if yer gonna henpeck me 'bout it, I guess I will."

"Good," Erwin muttered, pulling out two extra slices of bread. "Now, tell me 'bout yer plan."

"We're goin' to an old haunt a' mine. Yer gonna be cool an' no one's gonna know that you know me. I need you ta' hang back, like *really* hang back, Erwin."

"Alright, Jesus. I can hang back. Then what?"

"I'm gonna play like I want back in. They might wanna test me, or they might wanna kill me. Either way, chances are they're gonna take me back to...well, one'a their headquarters. Point is, yer gonna have ta be mah trump card. I could care less what happens ta tha posse, but there's one guy...he's in charge'a distribution, an' he can put us in contact with whoever's gettin' Pinwheel fer our neck a'tha woods. We're gonna have ta get him on 'is own an' put tha squeeze on 'im ta get what we want."

"An' we really haft put yer life in danger jus' ta get 'im alone?"

"Well, lemme tell ya Smith, these guys ain't gonna help jus' because we ask real nice-like," Levi snapped back, looking down as Erwin set a sandwich before him. "These guys'd just as soon kill me as look at me, an' unless they see some value in keepin' me breathin', they will. An' they'd sure as hell kill you given the chance, so yer gonna have ta play yer cards jus' right."

"I think I can handle it."

Levi snorted. "I wish I felt that confident."

Erwin sat down with his own sandwich and gestured toward the sketchbook. "An' what're ya doin', there?"

Levi turned the book so that it was facing Erwin. There, in the middle of the page, he had sketched out a death's head. "The man ya want, tha one we need ta take *alive* has this tattooed right on 'is neck. He's a big guy, a blond. Tha's who yer lookin' for."

"An what if none a' this goes tha way ya planned it?"

Levi smirked. "Well, chances are, it aint gonna go jus' like I got it planned. But these old boys...they ain't much fer change, an' I know how they operate. We shouldn't be too far off either way."

"I hope yer right," Erwin sighed.

"Well, that makes two of us."

# Lazarus

## Chapter Summary

It occurred to him to wonder where they were taking him, but it wasn't hard to know. He was being marched to his death. At least Erwin wasn't here. He could still get out alive. It was elegant, really, Levi thought, all their problems solved. He'd been trying to die for so long, this wasn't so bad. He'd wanted it; no more cases, no more pain, no more clay men, no more visiting graves, no more ghosts. Yeah, he reasoned, this would be just fine.

## Chapter Notes

**PLEASE NOTE THE WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:** This chapter includes suicidal thoughts, violence, mentions of past murder and rape, forced drug use, torture, and gender/racial slurs. Please be aware of this.

If you follow me on tumblr, you might remember me mentioning a chapter where I listening to nothing but Led Zeppelin while I wrote? If you want the full effect, listen (especially) to Black Dog, Kashmir, and Immigrant Song.

From here on out, this fic is pretty fucking intense. I'll let you dig right in!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

Enjoy!

The bike roared between his legs, all speed and shuddering power. Cold wind whipped through his hair, his goggles the only protection he had against the elements. Levi knew he should have worn a helmet, but he was feeling wild, reckless. He had to be, to be pulling some kind of fool shit like this. He was lucky Hange had kept his bike for him, and kept it in rideable condition too. Having it helped his flimsy-at-best cover story seem at least vaguely legitimate, which was vital—he didn't need to give these asshole a reason to shoot him. He'd done the best that he could, but if he made it through tonight, he'd be shocked.

It was okay. It was fine. There were cartels in Mexico that would peel your face off if they thought, even for a minute, that you might not be loyal. From the Angels, there would be nothing more than a solid beating and a bullet to the head. That much, he could handle. Erwin might be upset, but he would move on. It would be better this way. Levi had told him to

“hang back,” but had offered little else by way of instruction. He figured that would be enough to make Erwin feel he was involved. It wasn’t that Levi had planned to fail, per se, but rather that he had chosen to build in a number of contingencies that stacked the odds in the favor of Erwin emerging unscathed.

But for every action, there would be an equal and opposite reaction. Purposefully giving Erwin the opportunity not to get into too much shit meant that he had to stack the odds against himself. Ideally, he would have had time to start haunting the places where the Angels hung out, would have had time to introduce himself back into the scene, would have had time to be noticed, pointed out, whispered about, and brought in by invitation. As it were, he had one option; a hefty peace offering and the hope that they wouldn’t kill him on sight.

Somewhere behind him, Erwin drove his truck, following directions that Levi had scribbled down from memory. He was to stay back. If they took Levi to the woods, he was to follow from a safe distance. If Levi was taken into a cabin, no matter what Erwin heard, he was to wait until he knew that he could handle the situation and, should that time not come, he was to turn around, drive straight back to Louisiana, and claim he’d not seen Levi since the Good-Nite Inn. Levi couldn’t be sure that Erwin would comply with those instructions, but he was hopeful. It would be best if it didn’t come to that, but if it did, he had to trust that Erwin would think of his family, and not do anything stupid.

It was a long shot. Levi couldn’t worry about Erwin right now. He had to focus.

With practiced grace, he slipped around a car, and then another. He remembered flying through these hills, pumping the gas until he reached eighty, ninety, one hundred miles per hour. He never went that fast when Isabel was clinging to his waist, but when it was just he and Farlan, they would race like hooligans. Hange even rode with them sometimes, whooping and hollering and making a scene. Hange always made a scene.

Levi pressed on.

He arrived at the bar twenty minutes later, wind-whipped and solemn-faced. He wore his old black leather jacket, the insignia of the Angels sewn onto the back. The symbol that they’d chosen when they broke from the Hell’s Angels was a human skeleton, two large, bat-like wings protruding from his back, surrounded by flame. The symbol was supposed to show that they were emerging from the flames of Hell, and stronger for it. Farlan had designed it...he’d always been more talented than Levi, anyway. Levi could sketch, but Farlan had been creative. Without fanfare, he parked his bike, lit a cigarette, and walked inside.

With this crowd, he slid in seamlessly. It hadn’t been this easy at first. Levi was smaller than most—wiry, thin, short. He’d had to prove himself again and again, but eventually, they’d realized he was quicker and stronger than any of them. Now, he knew how to blend, knew how to walk, how to sidle up to the bar, order, how to size up the place. The bar was all black leather, blue jeans, shaved heads, half-naked girls and symbols of the Aryan Nation. Levi remembered learning them—some were familiar, like the death’s head, the swastika. Others had eluded him until his handler taught him the language of White Supremacy. Now he understood the 14, the 18, the 33/5, the crossed hammers, the drop of blood on a celtic cross. He spoke their language.

Black Dog pumped through the bar, and Levi knew that some things really didn't change, not with this crowd. He sat down at the bar, ordered a shot of Jack and a beer, and stared down at his hands. Someone would have already seen him. Someone would already be telling an enforcer, who would be moving the information up the ranks. Levi just had to wait.

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Erwin left the house twenty minutes after Levi, followed his instructions, and found himself sitting outside a bar with more motorcycles than he'd ever seen in one place. His hand found the gun Levi had given him...

*I can't carry, he'd said, grim. But you can.*

The gun was, of course, illegal, serial number filed away, unregistered. Erwin couldn't use his service weapon out here, so they were lucky that Levi had his old gear. Hange had stood in the doorway of the old barn that housed his club colors, his guns, and his bike, and looked tense enough to split right in two. It had been clear that they hadn't wanted Levi to do this, but they couldn't stop him either. Erwin didn't figure anyone could stop Levi, not when he'd made up his mind about something. And really, he understood that this was dangerous, but Levi had the whole thing in hand, didn't he? These people knew him, and he knew them, knew how they operated. And in the worst case scenario, Erwin would be there. Levi seemed convinced that they wouldn't try to kill him right there at the bar, and if there were only a few of them, he could handle that. They wouldn't be expecting him, and even so, he was pretty sure he could take on a couple of hillbilly tweakers. He had before.

Sitting here, in front of the bar, he eyed the trucks with their confederate flags hanging in the back windows, their rifle racks, and shook his head. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, "Fuckin' rednecks." Louisiana had its own way of doing things, and for that, Erwin was glad. They were more civilized, anyway. They had New Orleans, after all.

Levi had done his best to dress Erwin up like one of them without assigning him any defining colors. If the gang saw him wearing colors, they would want to know why the hell they didn't recognize him. He was meant to look like an average Arkansas boy, just passing through. So Hange found a flannel shirt and boots to go with his blue jeans. Just before he left, they had offered him a Budweiser trucker hat to help hide his features without standing out.

*Don' get yerself killed now, Big Man,* they'd said. Erwin had thought that was pretty nice of them, considering. Now he pulled that hat down, pocketed his keys, and made his way inside.

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The tap to his back came faster than he expected it to. Levi turned and found himself staring into a familiar pair of eyes, so dark they were almost black, skin caramel colored from the sun, and wrinkled around the eyes. He was a white brother, of course, and had the genealogy to prove it, but they called him "The Injun" because of the way he tanned so dark.

"Crash," he said, his tone devoid of all warmth. "Ain't you s'posed ta be dead?"

"Injun," he said, raising his brows, "I look dead ta you?"



“Iceman wants ta know why ya disappeared, if ya ain’t dead.”

“An’ I’ll be more’n happy ta tell him,” Levi said, swallowing down some beer. “I came ta do business.”

“What kinda business?” Injun asked, eyes narrowing.

“Good business,” Levi offered, opening his jacket so that Injun could get a good look at what was inside.

“Shit.” The Injun looked at him, straight into his eyes, then nodded. “Lemme talk ta Ice. We’ll see if he’s willin’ ta see you.”

Levi lifted his beer in something of a toast and turned back around in time to catch Erwin walking into the bar out of the corner of his eye. In Levi’s opinion, he looked ridiculous, but he fit in well enough to be largely ignored. As long as he didn’t do anything stupid, he would be okay.

The Injun was back before Levi finished his beer. “C’mon, Crash,” he said, “Ice’ll see ya now.”

Levi followed him through the press of the crowd, catching shocked looks on a few familiar faces as they registered him there, but mostly it was a sea of strangers, of men a head taller than him with thick arms and generous beer-bellies. A “Biker Body” was what he’d always called it, or at least, what he’d called it when he was with Farlan and not around anyone who’d take offense. The Injun lead him around to the back door, where he knocked twice, and then three times in a precise rhythm. A small window slid open, and an enforcer that Levi recognized opened the door. They’d always called him The Troll because he was big, ugly, and stupid, which made him the perfect gatekeeper for any club or meeting room.

“Crash?” he croaked out. Levi nodded, and the window closed before the door opened, The Troll pulling him inside.

“Damn, Crash, I thought you was dead.”

“You an’ everyone else,” Levi said, placing his hands up on the wall while The Troll patted him down.

“He’s clean,” The Troll said, pushing Levi roughly toward a gathering crowd. They reminded Levi of coyotes, gathering around to make a kill, yapping up a storm. From the crowd a tall, bleached-blond man emerged, his smile a little too wide, arms open.

“Mah prodigal son,” he said, voice booming. “Or should I call ya Lazarus? Jesus Christ son a’ god, Crash, I never thought I’d see ya again.”

“I was jus’ bidin’ mah time,” Levi offered back. The Iceman brought his big, meaty hands crashing down against Levi’s shoulders, but Levi stood firm.

“Well, a lil’ bird told me you was bearin’ gifts.”

“That I am,” Levi said. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a two pound brick of white powder, contained in a plastic bag and wrapped round with tape. “Fer yer pleasure, Ice. Taste that an’ tell me ya don’ miss me.”

Iceman took the package and cut a small hole in it with his knife. He dipped one finger in and rubbed the powder across his gums. A second passed before his eyes blew wide. “Fuck,” he said, then louder, “*Fuck*, Crash, where’d ya get this stuff?”

“I been down in Texas,” Levi shrugged. “Got in with tha big boys down there. They got more’a this stuff’n they can move. So I told ‘em about what ya’ll got. An’ they sent me up here ta make a trade.”

Ice stared at him, his gaze skeptical at best. For a second, he didn’t think Ice was buying what he was selling, but despite his stare, he dipped down to snort a bump from Levi’s bag. “Shit, *shit* that’s fuckin’ good,” he said, shaking his head and snorting. “Ya say ya got mor’a this?”

“Boatloads,” Levi replied. “In fact, you jus’ keep that. Consider it a peace offerin’.”

“An’ what is it they want?”

“You know what it is,” Levi said, “Pinwheel’s movin’ South, ain’t it? They wan’ in.”

“Tell ya what, Crash,” Iceman said, mouth twisting up into a grin, “How about ya snort up some’a this shit, while I think about what yer tryin’a sell me.”

“Don’ mind if I do,” Levi smiled, grabbing the package and pouring a bump onto the edge of his hand. He snorted it up in one go, the feel of it smacking him in the face just as it had the first time he tried it in the evidence room of the detective’s headquarters back in Lafayette. Evidence lockers always had the best shit, after all, and no one was ever likely to test that bag again. Even if they did, they’d never know who replaced it with white flour. A system with so many loopholes left itself ripe for exploitation and, Levi reasoned, no one else was going to be using the coke for anything important.

“Take another,” Ice urged, grinning. “Somebody get ‘im a double, whiskey.” And someone did. Levi took the bump, drank down the liquor, riding through the kick of the combination. Ice was fucking with him and he knew it, but he had to play along, had to keep himself in the good graces of the club, if he could.

“Ya know, Crash, I hope you ain’t been wearin’ our colors down there,” Iceman said, his face inches from Levi’s. Levi tried to focus on him but the drugs were fucking him up. He hadn’t done coke in a long time.

“Nah, Ice, I ain’t been,” he slurred, head lolling back slightly.

“You ridin’ fer some other club then?” There was an edge in his tone now, an edge Levi recognized as dangerous.

“Nah, jus’...jus’ been runnin’, ya know? Fer whoever’d hire me.”

“An’ how come you was playin’ dead, huh?”

“Well,” Ice pushed another bump under his nose. Levi snorted it up and went on, “Ya got Farlan, ya fig’gered out he was a rat, yeah?”

“Fuckin’ rat,” one of the other men spat on the ground, several joined him. Levi was too high to care.

“Well, ya’ll was right. ‘Cept his pig buddies came lookin’ fer me, fig’gered I’d found ‘im out an’ done ‘im in. Heat came down real fast...an’ if they’d gotten any more involved, it might’a put tha whole damn club in trouble.”

“So...you was jus’ protectin’ us?” Ice asked, a grin spreading across his wind-chapped lips. Levi nodded. “Ya hear that, ya’ll?” He yelled out to the others, “Ol’ Crash was jus’ protectin’ us! What a guy!” Everyone cheered, the sound of it twisting up in Levi’s ears, sounding like jeers from the pits of hell.

Iceman slung an arm around Levi’s shoulders, leaned down to his ear. “How about you an’ me an’ ....some of tha others go an talk business? Gotta get this shit ironed out ‘fore we take it to tha prez, don’t we?”

“Yeah Ice,” Levi slurred, “Sure, man.”

“You don’ look fit ta ride,” Ice grinned. “It’s all good, buddy. I think Squirrel’s got ‘is truck. Do ya, Squirrel?”

“Sure do,” a voice piped up. Levi remembered him...he’d been a prospect back when Levi ran with the Angels.

“Well then, c’mon.”

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Erwin was getting antsy. Nothing extraordinary had occurred in the half hour that had passed since they took Levi to the back, but anything could have happened by now. He couldn’t see or hear anything, but the possibilities were making his skin crawl. He was largely ignored by the crowd, but as he nursed a beer, he began to feel more and more out of place. Levi’s instructions on how to handle all of this had been vague at best, and as Erwin sat at the bar going over them again and again, that was becoming painfully clear. Was Levi purposefully trying to keep him away? Surely he had *some* idea of what these guys would do. Erwin felt doubt prickling hot beneath his skin, but it really didn’t matter now. He was just going to have to figure it out himself.

Just as the not-knowing became unbearable, a commotion kicked up at the back of the bar. Men were talking, whooping, and there was Levi, his grey eyes bloodshot and rimmed red, not focusing on anything, really. A couple of biker-types half-carried him and a few more followed behind, grinning and smacking each other on the back. Erwin felt his heart leap up to his throat and he almost, almost threw himself into a fray right then and there. But the bar was chock full of men who’d have been more than happy to beat him to death, and he could not, *could not* afford to act recklessly. Levi had made that abundantly clear and, considering

the company, he understood why. So he swallowed down the fear that threatened to pull him apart and pushed himself off the bar stool, electricity running down his limbs.

He made it outside just in time to see Levi shuffled into a truck, one of the ones he'd been scoffing at earlier. Two men were in the truck with him, two more swung up into the bed, whooping like coyotes around a kill. Erwin got into his own truck and started it up, his stomach turning, his mind sharp. They couldn't know that they were being followed; it was up to him to make sure he stayed outside the range of their vision.

He watched the way that the tail lights turned as they left the bar and, just seconds later, followed their path. There were twists and turns in the road, and the tail lights slipped out of sight here and there, making it almost impossible to keep track of their path. Erwin cursed, his body taut, hands clenching at the wheel. He couldn't afford to speed up too much, couldn't afford to fall behind. The truck with the confederate flag slipped back into view, and he sighed with relief. It was short lasting, however...within minutes, it was gone again. Erwin went around the next curve, but saw nothing ahead of him. He accelerated, but the truck was nowhere to be seen. His heart beat a merciless tattoo inside his chest, rattling against his ribs.

He'd lost them.

*They have these lil'...cabins in tha woods, Levi's voice came back to him. Stash houses an' tha like. If I'm unlucky, that's where they're takin' me.*

*Unlucky?* Erwin had asked, but Levi hadn't really given him a reply. Had instead gone on to describe what he should do, in such an event.

*They get me in a fuckin' cabin, yer gonna hafta play it real cool. Don't get jumpy, Smith. Don't get cocky either. Don't you dare come through that door until you know you've got the situation in hand, understand?*

And he had understood, he thought. Secure the perimeter. Maintain an element of surprise. But he couldn't do any of that if he was driving down an empty country road, no enemy in sight. Erwin's head spun through the possibilities, but he was already turning the truck around. They were gone, which meant they must have turned somewhere. He had to look for small paths, trails, anything unexpected.

He drove down the road slowly, his head hanging out the window. It took three passes, but he finally found it: a path marked only by the tread marks in the ditch. He turned sharply, narrowly missing a tree but made it on to the path unscathed. There was no relief, however. He had the path, but putting a bullet in someone's brain didn't take long, and he was already at least twenty minutes behind them, with no idea what he was doing. About half a mile up into the woods, the trail ended. There, he saw the truck that had taken Levi, empty.

They hadn't bothered to leave anyone to guard it. No one really wandered around in this part of the woods anyway, and anyone who came across a truck like that would know better than to fuck with it. Erwin was relieved for that...he needed to avoid alerting anyone to his presence. He cut the engine, checked his gun, and slid out into the woods.

He was in luck; five men with no concept of being followed made for an easy trail. Erwin didn't even have to look for it, the trampled underbrush and broken twigs were like shining beacons, pointing him toward the cabin. Still, he moved as quietly as he could, unwilling to give up his advantage for speed. If Levi was still alive, and Erwin had to believe that he was, then his only chance was the element of surprise.

Twenty minutes later he was stationed firmly behind a tree, the swelling overture of the crickets and frogs combining with the darkness to give him all the cover he needed. He breathed, listening to the sounds of fists hitting flesh.

*Hang on, Levi, he thought to himself. You ain't alone.*

\*\*\*

The drive had passed in a haze, the walk through the woods like pushing through cotton. He felt like he was floating, like he was living in a dream, Iceman's voice mingling with the others. It occurred to him to wonder where they were taking him, but it wasn't hard to know. He was being marched to his death. At least Erwin wasn't here. He could still get out alive. It was elegant, really, Levi thought, all their problems solved. He'd been trying to die for so long, this wasn't so bad. He'd wanted it; no more cases, no more pain, no more clay men, no more visiting graves, no more ghosts. Yeah, he reasoned, this would be just fine.

Big, meaty hands shoved him through a door and he stumbled, fell on the floor with a grunt. Somewhere above him, there was laughter. Levi laughed too, or tried to. He wasn't sure what sounds were coming out of his mouth, and that made him laugh harder. A sharp pain registered, and he realized that Ice had brought a fist crashing across his face. He could taste blood. He tried to stop laughing.

"Crash, oh Crash," Iceman said, looming large over him. "I'm sorry, buddy, but you was askin' for it."

He turned to the others, then, muttered something to them that Levi couldn't quite make out. He felt himself hefted up, put into a chair. Somewhere, duct tape was being pulled from the roll. His jacket was being pulled off and he let it go, riding the waves of his inebriation. Words burbled forth from his mouth, and Ice shot back, "What'd ya say, Crash?"

"Bump," Levi muttered. "Wanna bump."

Ice laughed then, loud and long and terrible, wheezing with his smoker's lungs. "Ya hear that! Lil' Crashman wants another bump!"

The laughter ended abruptly and Levi felt the air leave his lungs, the pain in his guts registering a moment later. Ice must have punched him again. He couldn't breathe.

"No, ya can' have a fuckin' bump, ya dumb motherfucker. It's time fer us ta have a lil' conversation."

Levi nodded, gasping for breath, his heart racing.

“Let’s talk about yer friends...” Ice pulled a chair up across from Levi, sitting down in it backwards while his henchmen bound Levi in duct tape. “See, for awhile, we didn’ know which one a’ ya’ll was rattin’ us out, but we knew one’a ya’ll was. Round about tha time we fig’gered it was you, we came up ta that tranny’s place in tha woods, but *it* wasn’ there... neither was you, in fact, jus’ yer lil’ slut, ‘longside Farlan.”

Ice pulled a knife from his belt loop, extending it with the push of a button. “We asked ‘em who tha rat was. But they didn’ seem ta know.”

Levi clenched his mouth shut. Even through the haze of coke and liquor, he knew exactly what Ice was trying to do. He wouldn’t speak.

“It was funny, ‘cause I’m really not sure they knew it was you, Crash! But we sure did.”

The information went through Levi like a knife. He’d always assumed that the only reason they let him live was because they thought Farlan was the rat. He knew Isabel was killed as collateral, but he’d at least thought that. He coughed to keep from sobbing, to keep from giving himself away. Ice laughed, and he felt another fist come across his face. It hurt more, this time. The drugs were wearing off.

“How tha fuck,” Ice started, standing now, sinking another fist into Levi’s gut. “How tha fuck do ya sleep at night, Crash?”

Levi retched, muttered.

“What tha hell was that, boy?”

“I...don’t.” Levi croaked out. “Sleep.”

“Good,” Ice replied, his boot landing on Levi’s shin. Pain exploded there and Levi yelled out, but the sound was cut short when another fist glanced his face.

“What a selfish piece a’ shit you are,” Ice muttered, shaking out his hand. “Lettin’ yer friends die fer you like that. I bet yer lil’ tranny chemist cried like a baby. I bet you did too, didn’ ya, Crash? We was gonna come after you, too, but then we heard ya offed yerself.” He leaned down, mouth just inches from Levi’s ear, breath rank with cigarettes and cheap beer. “It would’a been a helluva lot more honorable if ya had. But I don’ guess our outlaw code means nothin’ ta shit like you, does it?”

Another fist hit him, then another. Levi yelled out again, not much caring anymore about being stoic. This was precisely the end he deserved...maybe he’d not seen it before, but it was clear to him now. He’d been running from it ever since he came home and found Hange holding onto their dead bodies, sobbing, slicked down in their blood. He’d run from it with Pinwheel, first, then run all the way to the Deltas, but he couldn’t run forever. Dying wouldn’t bring them back, wouldn’t change what he’d done to them simply by knowing them, simply by loving them. They had been the sacrificial lambs, but their deaths could only buy so much time. It was Levi’s blood that had to be spilled.

A sharp pain brought him back to the moment, the point of Ice's knife biting into his cheek, his arm, his thigh. Ice was laughing, now, done with his monologues. voices around them were laughing, laughing, yipping at the scent of blood. Levi's blood. Levi was laughing too, until a fist connected with his jaw so hard that his whole chair tipped over. The laughter swelled and died, replaced by heavy breathing.

"Shit, let him lay there. I need a fuckin' smoke."

"You an' me both. It ain't like we gotta hurry."

"Nah boys, I'm gonna take mah time with this'n. Why don' ya'll step out fer a minute. I need a...private word."

Levi could hear the grin in Ice's tone, but he was beyond fear now. Whatever they did to him was inevitable. Everything was inevitable. He wondered if Isabel and Farlan had been angry at him when they'd died for his sins. He'd never told them what he truly was; only Hange knew, and they were sworn to secrecy. Farlan and Isabel had never been given the choice to stand by him, to protect them. They'd not given their lives...their lives had been ripped away from them. Levi might as well have done it himself.

The door closed. The other men were gone. Ice's grin swam into view. "Crash," he said, his voice quiet, "Usually, we jus' put a bullet in tha brain'a anybody we thinks'a rat. But that ain't what we did ta yer lil' friends, an' that ain't what we're fixin' ta do ta you."

Ice stood, landing a well-placed kick into Levi's gut. "I'm gonna make you suffer, Crash, and yer gonna suffer more'n your friends ever coulda imagined."

Levi willed his voice to drift into background noise. It wasn't working.

"I dunno how closely you looked at Izzy's body," Ice went on, "If ya had, ya might'a noticed that we all took a turn ridin' that filly 'fore we put 'er down. Not that she was'n' used to it or nothin'...that bitch fucked so many Angels she was practically growin' 'er own wings."

As he spoke, Levi heard a strange noise filling the air around him. It was something between a groan and a wail, long and low and loud. Around the time Ice started laughing, Levi realized that the sound was coming from his own throat.

"I'll fuckin' kill you," Levi gurgled, though he wasn't sure what made him say it.

"I'd like ta see that!" Ice laughed loudly, clutching his gut.

Levi felt a heavy vibration through the floor, and then another. A yell came from outside, and Ice had time to mutter, "What the hell?" before a body came hurtling through the front door.

*Erwin.*

Levi saw Ice's knife go skittering across the floor as an inhuman yell pierced the night. He heard the sound of impact, a curse, another impact, and then the unmistakable *click* of a gun being cocked.

“Motherfucking piece of shit hillbilly scumfucker,” Erwin yelled. “If I see yer fool ass move an inch I’m gonna blow yer half-baked brains straight into hell.”

A second of silence. Levi wasn’t sure he was breathing. The floor creaked. A shot rang out.

“FUCK!” Levi screamed, his ears ringing, “Ya weren’ s’posed ta shoot ‘im!”

“Calm down!” Erwin yelled back. “I jus’ shot one of ‘is lil’ friends. He was comin’ at me.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Ice asked, voice tinged in fear.

“That don’ fuckin’ matter, keep yer damn mouth shut.”

Levi craned his head down and realized that, in the very bottom edge of his vision, he could catch Erwin kneeling over Ice, his gun pressed to Ice’s temple. Erwin’s head turned and the gun raised, another shot firing out. Ice screamed and Erwin pressed the gun back into his temple.

“Shut the fuck up!”

“You shot Diesel!”

“You think I give a shit?”

“Hey, there’s some duct tape aroun’ here. Tape ‘im up. Leave ‘is mouth though.” Levi broke in. His head was still swimming, his body alight with pain, but he was coming back to himself now. He could die later. Erwin stood and pulled Ice up with him, marching him around the room at gunpoint while he found the tape. Levi heard him ripping pieces off, fashioning them into makeshift cuffs.

“Now you sit down on tha floor righ’ there an’ don’t move. I ain’t s’posed ta kill ya, but I got no problem blowing holes in yer limbs.” Erwin said, shoving Ice down roughly. He came over to Levi, cut him free with the knife, and lifted him up from the floor. Levi’s limbs were shaking, his stomach roiling, but after a moment, he managed to stand upright.

“Thanks,” he said. The relief in Erwin’s eyes was like nothing he’d ever seen, and it made him feel strange. He didn’t have time to put a name to the emotion, however, because The Injun was already turning over on the floor, groaning.

“Gimme that,” Levi muttered, pulling the gun from Erwin’s grasp. Without hesitation, he leveled it at Injun and put a bullet straight through his temple.

“Jesus,” Erwin said, looking at the splatter with a hand over his mouth. “Did ya really need ta pop ‘im? I jus’ did tha other two ‘cause they was comin’ at me.”

“It’ll be better that we leave no witnesses.”

Ice was practically shaking.



“Grab that piece’a garbage an’ put him in tha chair,” Levi said, holding onto his bruised gut and gesturing with the gun. Erwin complied. Levi felt like he was about to collapse, so he made his way over to the table and rested his weight against it.

“Crash, what’re ya doin’?” Ice asked. Erwin shoved him down into the chair, and Levi felt at the cut on his cheek.

“I came here ta get some information,” Levi said simply. “An’ yer gonna give it to me.”

“In-...information?”

“Yeah, ya dumb cunt. I need ta know about yer business down in tha Deltas.”

“I’m sorry Crash, I don’ know nothin’ about that.”

“Smith, cut ‘is finger off.”

Erwin lifted up the knife and made his way over to Ice, getting so far as to force the blade up to the joint of his pinkie before Ice yelled, “No! Don’t! Please!” Erwin stopped and looked at Levi, expression stony, and Levi wondered for a moment if he would have actually done it. He looked at Erwin standing there stoic and thought of him chasing his girls around the back yard, putting an arm around Jackie. Levi considered the way he’d rubbed slow circles into his back while he retched, the way he’d curled around him in bed refused to fuck him while he was high. Then he considered the fact that Erwin had just shot and killed two men after taking three down to rescue him, and something deep, deep within him felt like it was about to shatter.

He dropped his eyes to Ice.

“Alright, he wont, if’n ya start cooperatin’ like a good boy.”

Erwin tightened his grip slightly, letting the knife bite into Ice’s finger.

“Ah! Fuck! Please, okay! We distribute down there ta some meth heads. They take it from there, I dunno what tha fuck they do with it, okay?”

“Interestin’,” Levi pressed his bloody fingers up to his pulse, and found it steady. “What about them sex parties? With the whores an’ the white haired lil’ girl?”

“W-...what...?”

“Smith,” Levi started.

“No! No, I...I thought that was jus’ rumors, okay? I didn’ know that was a thing, alright? Please, Crash!”

“Tell me ‘bout tha rumors, then, Ice.” Levi’s voice was as cold and smooth as steel, now, and he reached over the table and slipped a cigarette from a spare pack.

“Well, tha meth heads tol’ me...one’a their buyers is this guy. Somebody serious, rich-like... prominent. An’ he has these twisted-ass parties, with like....kids and whores. It’s some Roman-ass shit, real fucked up. Tha’s all I know though, Crash, seriously.”

“Whaddya mean, Roman?”

“Well like...tha’s what their doin’, right? Havin’ feasts an’ doin’ tha whole hedonism thing. They even call tha main guy Caesar.”

“Caesar?”

“Yeah, tha’s...tha’s what I heard anyhow. Look, look! I don’ do that shit, okay? I don’t do that kid shit, it’s fuckin’ gross, an I ain’t like that! But I heard, tha’s all.”

Levi smoked thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded. “Alright. Yer gonna take us to yer meth heads. We’ll have about six hours ta decide whether ‘er not ta kill ya, so I suggest ya spend that time cooperatin’ as much as possible.”

# Gabriel

## Chapter Summary

“Good timin’,” He muttered. Erwin was stretching butterfly bandages across his cuts in lieu of stitches, but he stopped to look him in the face.

“You bein’ sarcastic?”

“Not at all,” Levi replied, their eyes locked. They stared at one another that way for a moment, and Levi’s stomach felt like it would drop out of his body and right onto the floor, so he swallowed roughly and cleared his throat. “I mean. Ice’d jus’ gotten started an’ I dunno...I wasn’ expectin’ you ta find us.”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, “Well I think ya underestimated me.”

Levi nodded. “Yeah, Smith...I did.”

## Chapter Notes

I'm really, really looking forward to everyone reading this chapter...I moved this week and I'm a wreck, but here it is. The lovely casanboss made some [fanart](#)! Thank you, dear! I was excited to see this scene drawn!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

Enjoy!

They were lucky that the cabin had a basic first aid kit, a sink, and soap. Erwin washed the cuts on Levi’s face, arm, and leg, cleaned his busted lip, and gave him a cursory check for broken ribs. He’d gotten there before Ice had really gotten started on his torture and for that, they could both be grateful. The cuts on his face and leg were shallow, meant to hurt but not to maim. Levi knew from experience that Ice had intended to draw out his torment through the better part of the night, and despite the blinding pain, he’d really only just begun.

“Good timin’,” He muttered. Erwin was stretching butterfly bandages across his cuts in lieu of stitches, but he stopped to look him in the face.

“You bein’ sarcastic?”

“Not at all,” Levi replied, their eyes locked. They stared at one another that way for a moment, and Levi’s stomach felt like it would drop out of his body and right onto the floor, so he swallowed roughly and cleared his throat. “I mean. Ice’d jus’ gotten started an’ I dunno...I wasn’ expectin’ you ta find us.”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, “Well I think ya underestimated me.”

Levi nodded. “Yeah, Smith...I did.”

They didn’t say much else after that, just finished the cleaning of Levi’s wounds, blindfolded Ice, and marched him away from the cabin. They took turns running him into trees as they made their way through the woods, laughing as he cursed to himself and muttered empty threats. Erwin had made the trek up to the cabin in ten minutes, but walking back took almost thirty. Fortunately, no one had expected Ice to take less than all night; by the time the Angels were searching for him, Erwin and Levi would be long gone.

When they reached the truck, they wrapped Ice’s arms and legs up in duct tape, then wrapped a piece around his mouth. Levi had some old horse blankets, so they put one under the man, and the other one on top of him. “Get comfy,” Levi said, his expression deadpan. “‘Cause yer gonna be ridin’ like this fer six hours. We’ll take the gag off outside’a Lafayette. ’til then, if I hear ya kickin’ up a fuss, I’m gonna cut yer balls off. Understood?”

Ice nodded, and that was that.

Erwin drove so that Levi could doze, going as fast as he dared and stopping only for coffee. After about four hours, he stopped to take a piss. He could swear Levi had been staring at him, but when he got back in the car he appeared to be sleeping. Erwin swallowed his thoughts and kept driving. It was better not to think. Better not to think about how he’d felt standing outside that cabin, hoping that he wouldn’t hear a gunshot, better not to think about the look in Levi’s eyes as he pulled him back together, patched him up.

Better not to think that he’d almost lost him.

They made good time, hitting Lafayette after only five and a half hours on the road. Erwin pulled over on a small side road outside of town, and in the dusky pinks of sunrise, he woke Levi.

“Ya ready ta get that fucker outta tha back?”

“Much as I wish we could jus’ leave ‘im back there ta rot...”

They made their way around to the back of the truck, opened the gate, and pulled Ice out by his feet.

“Ouch! Fuck! Ya’ll are cold,” he whined as soon as they pulled the duct tape from his mouth. Erwin brought a fist right up to his face.

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t wanna hear ya talkin’ ‘less yer tellin’ us how’ta get to yer meth heads. Understand?”

Ice nodded, looking to Levi for some kind of sympathy. Levi slid a knife from his sleeve and twirled it in his fingers without a word.

“Okay,” he said, and then louder, “Okay!” as Levi made a particularly menacing gesture. “We gotta go down southwest’a New Iberia. There’s a cookin’ house out in tha Deltas, real deep like. It’ll probably get washed out in tha next hurricane, or at least, I think they’s plannin’ on it. Wash away tha evidence like. They take tha Pinwheel an’ pay us. From there they got distributors an’ one of ‘em does tha sex parties. Tha other one handles raves an’ parties and runs tha shit up ta New Orleans. An that’s’much as I know, alright?”

“Yer gonna sit up front,” Levi said, “An’ yer gonna open yer fool mouth only when yer needin’ ta give directions. If ya wag that tongue any more’n that, I’m gonna cut it off and yer gonna haft’a point instead, ya hear?”

Ice nodded mutely.

Somehow, they all managed to fit in the front seat of the truck, riding along in silence. Ice didn’t dare speak, and Levi and Erwin weren’t about to discuss anything in front of him, either. As they drove, the area became progressively more barren, the houses giving way to stretches of land, dotted by the occasional ruins of something that used to be a barn, a fisherman’s home, sometimes even the shell of an old gas station. Looking around, Levi thought that he truly hated southern Louisiana. The misty mountains and dense woods of Arkansas had reminded him of what it was like to be out of such a dull, flat place. The mountains had their share of problems, but deep enough in the woods, it didn’t matter. Deep enough in the woods, you could make your own reality; Hange was living proof of that. He wanted to think that he might leave this place soon, that after this case, he would be done with Lafayette, but whenever he considered asking for a transfer, something ached in his gut. He was loathe to admit it, but he knew exactly what that something was.

The house, when they came upon it, was almost comically stereotypical. Big, ferocious dogs were running out the lengths of the chains that kept them tethered to the front porch of what could only be described as absolute squalor, every part of the structure falling apart, decaying. Two men walked out on to the porch, heavily tattooed, heads covered in stringy, unwashed hair, wearing dingy wifebeaters and old worn jeans. Each one was sporting a shotgun and a wicked frown. “Smith, stay put,” Levi said as he opened the truck door and pulled Ice out, splaying his hands out to show he wasn’t packing.

“Well fuck,” one of the men muttered, looking Levi up and down. Together, they were quite a sight—Levi’s right arm and leg covered in dried blood, a gash across his cheek held shut with butterfly bandages, his lip split, and Ice with his own bruises, duct taped into submission. Had the methheads been planning to shoot, the sheer oddity of the sight before them certainly stopped them in their tracks. After a moment of stunned silence, one methhead asked, “What’re ya doin’ here, Ice? Who’s this lil’ fucker?”

“Don’t shoot!” Ice called out, suddenly remembering himself. “We ain’t here ta fuck with yer shit, he jus’ has some questions.”

“Questions?” the other meth head asked, cocking his shotgun. “Why should we answer yer fuckin’ questions?”

“Tell ya what,” Levi said coolly. “I’ve got jus’ under two pounds’a premium uncut coke fer ya’ll if ya do. You can snort it all yerself or cut it sixteen ways fer all I care, I jus’ gotta know a few things.”

“An who’s tha guy in yer truck, there?”

“He’s nobody. Ya want tha coke ‘r not, gentlemen?”

The two of them looked at one another, frowning. Finally, the first one shrugged and said, “Give us a taste first, how about?”

“Only if ya put down them guns,” Levi countered. The men lifted the guns to show him that the safety was on, and let them fall to their sides.

“That’s as down as they gettin’, lil’ man,” the second meth head said. “Now give it here.”

Levi reached into the glove box and pulled out the coke, only slightly diminished from when he’d given it to Ice. He walked the bundle over, pulling Ice behind him. Methhead One took the package, dipped in a finger, and rubbed it over his gums before handing it on to Methhead Two.

“Well, hot damn,” Methhead One said, “Ya weren’t lyin’! We could fetch a price fer this shit!”

“Yup. We gotta deal?”

The men looked at one another again, then Methhead One turned and smiled at Levi, his mouth a mess of blackened and broken teeth. “I’m Gunter, an’ this’ mah brother Tom. Tell us yer questions, an’ we’ll see if we can help a brother out.”

Levi didn’t trust either man as far as he could throw them, but he figured it was worth it to try his luck with them. Either way, he wasn’t going to stay here long, and the fewer questions he had to ask, the better. The cardinal rule of talking to a crystal head was that they wore out easy. “Ice here tells me ya’ll distribute tha Pinwheel down in these parts. Only it’s been showin’ up in mah territory, an’ I need ta know where it’s comin’ from. People tellin’ me ‘bout some kind white-haired boy givin’ out boatloads’a tha stuff. You know ‘im?”

Gunter turned to Tom again, the two of them looking at each other for another long moment before they both turned back to Levi.

“We ain’t gonna talk about much,” they said. “But if ya wanna find that lil’ fucker, I heard ‘e’s crashin’ at tha warehouse. Yer gonna be lucky if’n ya find ‘im ‘fore tha boss does. That lil’ bastard stoled damn near a thousand tabs an’ ‘e’s been givin’ ‘em out like candy to tha party kids and whores.”

“An’ where’s this warehouse?”

“Ask Ice. Ya ain’t heard none’a this from us, un’nerstand?”

“Course. One more thing.”

“What?”

“Who’d ‘e steal from?”

“Sorry, son, that information is privileged.”

“Thank ya, gentlemen,” Levi said, then backed up toward the truck, Ice between him and the shotguns. He climbed in first, pulling Ice up after him. Erwin started the engine, and a few breathless moments later, they were off. Ice was practically hyperventilating until Levi slapped him across the face.

“Listen up,” he said, “Yer gonna tell us how’ta get ta this warehouse. Then, if ya ain’t as stupid as ya look, yer gonna let me book ya on assault charges.”

“Why would I do that?” Ice sputtered, “I served time already, I don’ wanna do it again.”

“Well, then ya might as well lemme put a fuckin’ bullet in yer brain.”

“What tha hell’re ya talkin’ about, Crash? C’mon, man...”

“Billy Bob an’ Cletus back there’r gonna tell yer prez that you was snitchin’ out club business to tha cops an’ yer gonna be lucky if all they do is bury a bullet in yer brain, dumbass.”

“Tha cops? Yer still’a cop?”

“Jesus fuck,” Erwin finally cut in. “You need ta lay off’a them drugs, boy! Yer’ dumber’n’a god damned doornail. What the hell’d ya think this was about?”

“I didn’ know cops could...” Ice started, but Levi cut in.

“We’re cops, dumbass, an’ that means we can do as we damn well please. I can shoot you straight through yer fool head right now, in this truck, an’ I can do it with impunity. So don’ think fer a god damn minute that cops can’t do this shit.”

Levi took a deep breath, and Erwin looked over long enough to see him sweating, his eyes going wide. The letdown from the drugs was taking a hell of a toll. Erwin hoped that they could make it to this warehouse quickly, find the boy, and be done with it.

“Anyway, you can let me book ya on assault, serve yer time an’ hope no one offs ya in tha big house, or you can wait an’ see what tha club has in store fer you, considerin’ ya got three good men killed an’ snitched to tha State Police.”

“I’ll go,” Ice said quietly, and then, “I’ll go. Jus’...jus’ don’t tell anyone where I’m at, okay?”

“Tell ya what,” Levi said, “We find our man, I’ll book ya in Lafayette an’ I wont tell a soul where you gone. If’n we don’, I’ll wrap ya up like a damn present an’ drop ya on the prez’s doorstep. And Ice?”

“Yeah?”

“If tha charges don’ stick, or if word’a any of this gets out...actually, if I even suspect, fer a minute, that you done opened yer fat mouth, well,” Levi looked over at him, eyes manic and wide, red rimmed and bloodshot, sweat beading his forehead, hands shaking, and said, “I put men away who’d still kill for me in a heartbeat. I got more friends inside than out, an’ I ain’t gonna hesitate to get the biggest, ugliest one ta make you ‘is bitch before ‘e sticks a shank in yer guts, you got it?”

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It took around forty-five minutes to reach the series of industrial buildings that Ice swore comprised the so-called “warehouse”. The sun was in full force, now, and Erwin knew that they should be hungry, exhausted, but adrenaline was running so high that no one seemed to notice. They were closing in on their killer now, so similar to Ibis and yet markedly different. Levi wondered if it was too much to hope that he’d not killed again, if it was too much to hope that they’d made it in time to prevent any more of what Erwin called “human sacrifices”. That phrase was still stuck in his head like a bad song, playing over and over again, reminding him of his guilt. He could have taken this route much sooner, really, could have tried chasing down that church boy lead, could have saved Cassie Miller. Theories swam through his mind in a hazy mist, theories about where they were coming from, these bleached-blond murderers with their clay men and their iconography. In the Deltas, it was almost impossible to ignore the whispers of occult activity, but it didn’t feel right. They were pulling symbols from this place and that, but this Roman business, this Caesar, these sex parties...that didn’t seem very cult like, in Levi’s opinion. It seemed like an erotic fiction version of a cult, perhaps, but he’d researched the occult long enough to smell an impostor. Still, some form of training was producing these killers. He couldn’t help but wonder how many more there would be.

“Jus’ park wherever,” Ice muttered. “Ain’t nobody expectin’ you.”

“Alright, our gear, service arms an’ badges’r in tha lockbox in tha back,” Levi said. “Ice’s gonna go first and play human shield, an’ we’re comin’ in behind him.”

They parked, suited up with vests, State Police jackets, badges and guns, cut the duct tape off of Ice and replaced it with cuffs.

“You ready, Smith?” Levi asked, casting a glance over at Erwin.

“Yup,” Erwin replied with a nod. “Let’s go find this son of a bitch.”

Levi pushed Ice before him, one hand on his cuffs, the other holding a gun. The door to the warehouse was cracked open about a foot, and the two of them were able to slide in fairly easily. Erwin followed protocol, moving around to the other side of the building to cover back exits. Inside, the warehouse reeked of bodies, sweat and humanity, the air stale despite the industrial fan that spun lazily in the corner. Shafts of sunlight illuminated bright strips across the concrete floor, where Levi spotted a few lumps of passed-out party goers, fallen asleep wherever they landed. It must have been quite a time, Levi thought, but then again, it always was with Pinwheel.



The warehouse was, more or less, just a large open space. Levi didn't see any bleached blond heads or suspicious signs so he kept moving, emerging from the back door to find Erwin.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Next building."

The next building was a twisting maze created by large, hanging tarps that appeared to be connected to the ceiling. Levi clicked his flashlight on and gestured for Ice to walk ahead of him, making it clear that if he fucked it up, Levi would shoot him. Erwin ran around the back again, this time coming in through the back door. There were more people on the floor this time, and Levi spotted several people who still appeared to be tripping, waving their arms in the beam of his flashlight, giggling, talking nonsense. Their voices echoed through the building, making it difficult to discern where they were coming from. Somewhere in the middle of the maze he and Erwin practically bumped into one another—still nothing.

The next building was squat, smaller than the others. The door was locked, and someone had spray painted a large, day-glo sign across the door that read, "KEEP OUT." Levi felt his skin prickling, the hair on the back of his neck standing up, and he gestured for Erwin to go around the back. A few minutes later, Erwin came back around, shaking his head. One way in, one way out. Levi took a deep breath, then dragged Ice over to an electrical pole.

"I'm leavin' ya here," he whispered. "Don't make a fuckin' sound."

Ice nodded, and Levi undid his cuffs, fastening them again with Ice's arms around the pole. With that done, he came back, lifting his foot to gauge where he'd need to kick the door. Satisfied, he turned to Erwin and nodded.

The doorframe split under the force of his kick. Levi ran inside, Erwin right behind.

The smell hit them like a wall. Levi figured the adrenaline and the focus it created was the only reason why they didn't start retching immediately; it was the patina of death, of old blood and rotting meat.

With burning eyes and searing lungs, Levi swung around a corner, gun first, and found himself face to face with the killer.

The man—boy, really—squatted before a woman's corpse, a bowl of blood in his hands. His hair was bleached white, the roots dark brown, a shocked look on his face. The room was filled with cots, at least fifteen of them, three of them containing the corpses of women in various stages of decay, dressed up all in white, their hands bound in the position of prayer. Containers of blood lay everywhere. The boy wore a white robe, bloodstained and filthy, the whole nightmarish scene illuminated by a contractor's lamp.

"G...gentlemen," The boy said, but he sounded so young, frightened and beyond his depth.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Levi muttered. "State Police, son. Put yer hands on yer fuckin' head."

"They can no longer die, for they are like angels," the boy said, his hands raising slowly, "Like the angels, pure and holy."

Levi wanted to scream, wanted to shake the boy, but he just snapped cuffs on him, and dragged him up off the floor. “C’mon.”

They practically ran for the door, the stench unbearable, clinging to the insides of their nostrils even after they were in the fresh air, gasping and coughing. The boy stood stoic, mouthing words in a language Levi didn’t recognize. In the sunlight, it was easy to see that he had the same blisters as Ibis, the same white-pale skin, but his eyes were green. Like Ibis, he looked like the shell of something that used to be human.

“I’m callin’ it in, Levi,” Erwin said, still gagging. “You got ‘im?”

“Yeah,” Levi replied, “Go on ahead. Tell ‘em they’re gonna need them hazmat suits, too.”

“Will do.”

Erwin jogged away and Levi turned to the boy. “What’s yer name, son?”

The boy looked around as if moving through a dream. Levi was sure he was high. “Yer name, kid! What’re ya called?”

“Gabriel,” he said softly, dreamily. “Lucifer.”

“Alright well, Gabriel Lucifer, yer under arrest.”

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Erwin hardly remembered that it was a Sunday morning. The events of Friday seemed like a lifetime ago, maybe even like someone else’s lifetime ago. When he called it in—suspect apprehended, homicide victims, three bodies—Dispatch sounded shocked. As far as anyone else knew, he was off the clock and spending time with his family. This was, perhaps, the last call anyone had been prepared to receive this morning.

Even so, forty-five minutes later, the place was swarming with tech, with local officers, and even with some other State. Erwin and Levi were being checked over by paramedics, Gabriel and Ice had been loaded into squad cars, and about forty scared-looking party kids were huddled inside the warehouse, waiting to be questioned.

It was a madhouse.

Levi was batting away paramedics, insisting he was “fine”, and refusing their recommendation that he go to a hospital. Erwin let himself be looked over but, truly, Levi was the one who’d gotten himself hurt. Looking at the differences in their injuries, it didn’t sit well with Erwin. How come he was emerging from this whole thing without a scratch when Levi had been force-fed cocaine and liquor, punched, kicked, cut...no, it didn’t sit right at all.

“Erwin, c’mon,” Levi said, gesturing him over. Erwin slid down from the ambulance where he’d been sitting and walked over, following Levi to the squad car where Gabriel sat. Levi gestured for him to slip in the front, while he opened the back and took a seat next to Gabriel.

The windows were rolled down, but the car still reeked. Gabriel blinked at them each in turn, languid and, considering the circumstances, unnaturally calm.

“Gabriel,” Levi started, “I’m Levi. I got a few questions fer you.”

“Yes sir,” Gabriel said, “I’ll be more’n happy to oblige you gentlemen. I’m a very obligin’ boy, they say, sir.”

Something sickly settled in the back of Levi’s throat, but he pressed on. “See, I met a girl recently. Looks a lot like you. Told me ‘er name’s Ibis.”

“Ah,” he chuckled, “Ibis, yes, dear Ibis. She’ll always be pitiful, but she’ll garner no pity. We sing in harmony.”

The phrase alone made Erwin’s guts twist up into knots.

“Yeah, she said that too. In fact, Ibis told us all about you,” Levi bluffed.

“She did? I fin’ that surprisin’. Ibis never was a servant of tha King, tha One True King, tha One True Caesar. Give unto God what is God’s give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, ya know, with tha doves...”

“Is that what we caught ya doin’, Gabriel?”

Gabriel’s pale brow furrowed, and he looked genuinely flummoxed for a moment, biting at the skin on his lips, reaching up to pick a blister.

“You seem like a reasonable man, sir. A very kind an’ reasonable man. Surely you understand that I can do no wrong, sir. I do not know what it is. Angels care not fer tha affairs of tha world, we live fer our god, our father. We sing in harmony.”

“Sure,” Levi said with a small nod. “An’ what you was doin’ in there, with them girls, that wasn’t wrong?”

“Angels never age, sir, angels never get too old.”

“That scares ya, then? Gettin’ old? Gotta make new angels ta keep from gettin’ old, do ya?”

Gabriel’s lip quivered, and he shook his head. His eyes began to fill with tears and he shook his head harder and harder. “I’m a good boy, sir, an obligin’ boy. I was always a good boy, sir, I ain’t never done no wrong.” He reached over with shaking hands, reached over to grasp at Levi and Erwin realized with sudden clarity that he was separated from them by the protective steel cage of a squad car, that if Gabriel tried something, several vital seconds would pass before he could pull Levi out of the back seat. His muscles tensed and he started to go for the door, but Levi shook his head, a minute gesture, but one that Erwin caught nevertheless. Gabriel reached for Levi’s hands, and Levi took his invitation, wrapping their hands together, staring into Gabriel’s eyes.

“I am but a dream,” he whispered, “A creature of mah father’s imagination. He has realized this, now, and I’ve been banished inta tha nothingness from which I came. Back to tha

meaningless nothingness a'this world, see, sir? God made me a bad child an' I have been cast out though I've done mah best. They are better, better children. They are better than this creature."

"You been replaced," Levi whispered back, still staring into the boy's eyes. "Caesar replaced you."

Tears were falling down Gabriel's face, now.

"But I can do no wrong," he said, voice cracking. "I can do no wrong."

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Exhaustion was settling into Erwin's bones, every part of him aching and complaining and overly exerted. He was doing his best to work up a report, to explain what had happened in an entirely believable way while avoiding any damning truths, but his head kept nodding, his eyes kept slipping closed. He and Levi had more or less worked their story out in the truck on the way over. For the purposes of the report, Levi had gotten in touch with an old deep-cover contact who had tipped him off about a white-haired boy hanging out around the warehouse, distributing meth and ecstasy. The deep cover contact, Ice, hadn't been too happy to see Levi, and had assaulted him before Levi got the upper hand in the situation and got him to talk. After getting the tip, Levi had grabbed Erwin and they'd immediately gone to the scene, as the information led them to believe that there was a victim in immediate danger who hadn't yet been killed.

They would both be put under review for checking into the situation without informing Dispatch, but considering they'd caught their guy, Erwin figured it wouldn't put them out of commission too long. At least, he hoped it wouldn't. Levi had been running around manically, muttering about abductions and Andrew Gutierrez, the both of them painfully aware that their reach would be limited until they'd spoken to the review board. No one was in the office today, though, and they needed to do whatever they could while they still had time.

Erwin stifled an enormous yawn. The problem was, of course, that they were both thoroughly exhausted. And, Erwin knew, if he was tired, Levi must be in no shape to work at all.

He finished typing up the report and went to make the requisite copies. He'd not heard a peep out of Levi in awhile, so after sliding a copy of the report under Pixie's office door, he went to find him. It didn't take long—he was in the records room, passed out, his head resting on file. Erwin made his way over, trying to be as quiet as he could, until he was standing over Levi and looking down at him. The cut on his face needed to be cleaned again and bandaged, and he definitely needed to change out of his bloodied, torn clothing, yet here he was, half-killing himself over a case. Did he have a deathwish? Was that it? Despite his renegade tactics, there was some honor in the way he threw himself into a case, whole-hog. The way he'd admitted to underestimating Erwin was weighing heavily on Erwin's mind. If he'd underestimated Erwin, then he hadn't expected him to show up at that cabin. And if Erwin hadn't shown up, Levi would have surely been killed, and quite gruesomely at that. And what would have been accomplished then? Did he expect Erwin to come home to his family, to go on living his life like nothing had happened?

*I need ya ta stick me in whatever mental category you keep fer Mike or Ness or hell, even Nile, an' I need ya to keep me there.*

“You really don’t know me at all,” Erwin whispered softly, barely more than a breath leaving his mouth. “I ain’t gonna let ya kill yerself.”

He reached down, brushing the dark hair away from Levi’s eye, taking care not to touch the cut on his cheek. Levi stirred, then started, sitting up abruptly.

“God damnit,” he muttered thickly. “You creepy bastard...were ya watchin’ me sleep’r sumthin?”

“Only for a second’r two,” Erwin shrugged.

“Well, look, I’m tryin’a find a kid that was abducted tha’ could match ol’ Gabriel’s description. Ya think we can arrange fer him ta walk by Ibis’ room’r sumthin? I wanna see what happens when they see each other.”

“Levi...” Erwin started, but Levi pressed on.

“Look, everybody’s sayin’ this’ some kinda cult thing, like there’s some kinda cult makin’ these monsters and pumpin’ ‘em out, but I ain’t convinced, Smith, not one bit. See, if our lil’ Ibis is Matilda Macarty, then she was kidnapped by somebody knew enough ‘bout ‘er situation ta get ‘er parents ta cooperate. In other words, they pulled some strings so that if’n anybody ever started lookin’ close, all they was gonna find was what we did. What if our Gabriel was tha same?”

Levi pointed to the box of files before him. “We need kidnappin’s that occurred when he was, I’m guessin’, five’r so. So twelve, thirteen years ago. Lookin’ fer boys with green eyes an’ dark hair. Poor kids, maybe ‘e’s payin’ off tha parents...”

“Who? Who’s paying off the parents?”

“Caesar. I think this guy they’re callin’ Caesar is tha one kidnapping tha kids. Somethin’s happenin’ to them, some kinda brainwashin’, an’ they come out killers. That shit they say, ya know, like the crazy talk? It’s comin’ from somewhere. He’s doin’ this on purpose.”

“But why?” Erwin asked, “Why program ‘em ta kill, if all their killin’ is prosts, an’ they’re leavin’ mountains’a evidence every time they do?”

Levi huffed out a sigh and shook his head. “I ain’t sure. Somewhere, somehow, this shit’s gotta make sense. But it sure is hard to fig’ger.”

Erwin hummed and nodded, staring down at the file Levi had been asleep on. “Look...I think ya need to get home, get some rest, an’ hit this tomorrow.”

“Smith, you know well as I do we’re gettin’ put on review soon as Pixis gets in here in tha mornin’.”

“Yeah well, they ain’t gonna stop ya combin’ through dusty old records. You can do this shit tomorra’, an’ passing out on the files ain’t helpin’ nobody.”

Levi looked at the box of files mournfully, rubbing his hand over his mouth.

“Alright, you know what?” Erwin said, exasperated, “Let’s grab a couple’a these boxes an’ you can take ‘em home. Alright?”

“Deal,” Levi said quickly. Erwin felt relieved.

They made their way out, each with a banker’s box of kidnapping files. The sun was already setting and Erwin wasn’t exactly sure when Levi planned to get to these, but if it would appease him, if he would get home and rest, Erwin didn’t really mind.

“Lemme driva ya home,” he offered, “You ain’t fit ta tie yer own shoes, much less drive a vehicle.”

“I’m fine,” Levi replied.

“No, ya ain’t. Not really. Will ya jus’ fuckin’...humor me? Please?”

“I’m too tired ta argue with ya, Smith.”

“Good.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were pulling up outside Levi’s house. He’d been dozing in the passenger seat, and Erwin had been happy to let him. As they stopped, he awoke, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“Smith, how’re ya gonna get home?” he asked, looking around.

“I fig’gered I’d borrow yer truck, come pick ya up in tha mornin’. You aint usin’ it anyhow, right?”

Levi frowned, but shrugged. “Nah, I ain’t. I guess that’s alright.”

“We can go grab my car in tha mornin’. Listen...you gonna be okay?”

“Jesus Christ,” Levi muttered. Erwin figured that was all the answer he was going to get.

“Look, lemme jus’...come in an help ya clean them cuts, okay?”

“If it’ll shut ya up...” Levi muttered, pushing his way out of the truck. Relieved, Erwin followed.

Inside, Levi stopped at his fridge and stared aimlessly at it’s meager contents. Finally, he turned to Erwin and said, “Want some cereal?”

“I’d love some.” He’d plundered the fridge at the office when they got there, but that was hours ago and it had been a long, long day. Levi pulled out a gallon of milk and plucked a

box of Lucky Charms out of the cabinet. Erwin laughed.

“You eat that shit? The girls’r always beggin’ for us to buy it...”

“It’s good,” Levi shrugged, “Try it.”

And it was good; better than it had any right to be, by Erwin’s estimation. Maybe it was the exhaustion or the overwhelming hunger, but that bowl of cereal was one of the best things he’d ever eaten. Bowls emptied, they made their way to the bathroom upstairs, where Levi pulled out his own first-aid kit, and Erwin washed his hands. Wordlessly, Levi stripped off his filthy, bloodstained shirt and pants, wincing as he did so. Erwin told himself not to look but looked anyway, his eyes stopping and resting on the bruises that were blooming across Levi’s torso. They were angry red, purples and yellows settling in beneath them. His eyes travelled across the cuts on his leg, the scar from Ibis barely healed, the bruise on his shin, then back up to his bruised cheekbone, his busted lip.

“God damn,” Erwin muttered, not wanting to consider the additional damage done by the drugs, the alcohol. “You sure can take a beatin’, can’t ya?”

“Been practicin’ fer a long time,” Levi said with a shrug. “Nah, seriously though, this fuckin’ hurts.”

“Ya got painkillers?”

“Yeah, but I fig’ger my liver’s been put-upon enough, don’t ya think?”

“I do.” Erwin dried his hands and dug into the first aid kit for butterfly bandages, antibiotic ointment, and alcohol swabs. Levi winced as he tended to his cuts, occasionally hissed a curse, but overall he was a shockingly model patient. Erwin fitted the last butterfly bandage over the cut on Levi’s thigh, and though he knew he should stand up, say his goodbyes, and drive home, he found his hands lingering there.

“Erwin?” Levi asked, and though it sounded like he meant it as a warning, his voice was soft, almost gentle. Erwin’s jaw clenched. Levi was standing with his ass resting on the edge of the bathroom sink, Erwin kneeling before him, one hand pressed against his right thigh, the other sliding up his left side. Slowly, Erwin brought his forehead to rest on Levi’s stomach, the violence and the uncertainty of the night before pounding at him in waves. “Erwin, what’re you...” but Levi’s voice cracked and dropped as Erwin pressed a kiss to the ridge of his hipbone.

“Levi,” he whispered, dropping a line of kisses across his abdomen. “I thought I was gonna lose you.”

Levi’s grip on the sink tightened, his chin dropping to his chest.

“Do ya know how fuckin’ scared I was?” Erwin asked, refusing to look at Levi, lipping at the skin below his bellybutton. “I know it’s fucked up, Levi, an’ I know ya told me ta forget you, but I can’t, Levi...I can’t.”

Levi was silent, but his fingers threaded their way through Erwin's hair, winding through it, tugging at it lightly. "Erwin, I jus'..." he started, but Erwin stood, pulled Levi's bruised face into his hands, looked into his bloodshot eyes.

"Tell me you don't want this," Erwin whispered, "An' I'll stop."

Levi's mouth opened, closed, opened again, his hands slipping up to Erwin's waist, sliding under his shirt, tentative at first, then more purposeful. Erwin knew he wouldn't remember using those same words a few nights prior, when he'd been high on Pinwheel and hungry to be fucked, and maybe it wasn't right, wasn't fair, but that was the only question that mattered. Standing there in his bathroom, staring into one another's eyes, breath coming in shallow gasps, hearts pounding, Erwin knew the answer, but he needed Levi to confirm it.

"God help me," Levi whispered, and then he was surging up to catch Erwin's lips with his own, the force of it pushing Erwin back into the wall but the dam had broken; they were on each other in seconds, Levi pushing his way into Erwin's arms, Erwin pulling him up until his legs were wrapped around Erwin's waist.

"Fuck," Erwin muttered, catching the taste of blood on his lips and realizing that Levi's lip must be bleeding again. He didn't care, didn't care about anything but the taste of Levi, the smells of him, the feel of his body in his arms, solid and light all at once, small and furious and threatening to leave him breathless.

"Yes, yes, Erwin..." Levi gasped and shuddered, Erwin's tongue and teeth making their way down the column of his throat. Levi threw his head back and moaned and Erwin went painfully hard, his breath coming in gasps. Somehow he maneuvered Levi down the stairs, laying him down on the mattress in the living room. Levi made quick work of Erwin's shirt, pulling it off like a man starved, practically launching himself back at Erwin's lips while he struggled to unbutton his jeans. This was different, so different from the last time, all desperation and fingernails and broken gasps, all impact and explosion.

Erwin willed his mind blank, willed himself to focus on nothing outside of Levi, Levi's body, Levi's touch, Levi's lips...he'd been dreaming about this for so long, it never occurred to him Levi would be so different from the pliant collection of parts he'd conjured in his fantasies. His body was hard and sharp, his kisses rough and full of teeth, and Erwin found himself responding in kind, shoving Levi's body into the mattress, fisting his hand in his hair, sinking his teeth into the meat of Levi's thigh, his ass, the muscle of his arm. Levi was still wearing his briefs and Erwin pulled at them roughly, but Levi shook his head.

"I don't *care*, Levi," Erwin growled but Levi shoved his hands away.

"Let me do it, okay?"

Erwin did, using the momentary break to pull off his own jeans and underwear. When he turned back to Levi, he was naked and laid out on the bed, and though the room was dark, Erwin couldn't help the hungry ache that pulsed through his belly and straight down to his cock.

He climbed back onto the mattress and Levi was on him again, flipping him over on his back and shimmying down to take his cock with his hands and tongue and lips. Erwin cried out at



the feeling of Levi's lips wrapping around the head of his cock, his hands fisting Levi's hair in a wordless demand. The vibrations of Levi's moans shot straight from the head of his cock down through his balls and Erwin shoved his head down, groaning as Levi's nails cut into his hip, grasping for purchase.

"Ah," he gasped, pulling Levi's head up, "C'mere."

"What?" Levi asked breathlessly, "You wanna fuck me now?"

"God damn right I do," Erwin breathed, reaching his hand down to find Levi's junk. Levi swatted him away and dug around in a box next to the bed. He came up with a bottle of lube and a condom and tossed them to Erwin, who ripped open the condom and rolled it on before squirting some lube into his hand.

"You ever fucked a boy in tha ass before, Smith?"

"Can't say that I have."

Levi snatched the lube away from him and poured some on his fingers. He reached around and slipped one inside, still straddling Erwin's hips, moaning as he worked himself open. "It's been awhile fer me, so you best start slow."

"Lemme do that," Erwin said, shooting a hand out to grab at Levi's wrist. He spread the lube on his hand over his fingers and pushed one inside. "Fuck, Levi," he groaned, "Yer so fuckin' tight."

"You wonderin' how I'm gonna fit a big boy like you up there?"

Erwin's cock pulsed. Levi groaned.

"Get another finger in there an' you'll see how nice I stretch."

Erwin had three fingers in before too long, and every part of him felt wound up like a spring, like he was about to explode. Levi moaned, "Now, Smith, fuck me *now*," and Erwin was on him, flipping him over and pushing his cock in an inch at a time. Levi swore and panted and Erwin matched him, shocked at how tight he was, at the wanton moans that shivered through him, at the way he rocked his hips back, hungry and pressing for more.

"Fuck," Erwin whispered, then louder, "Fuck, *Fuck*."

The first few thrusts were slow, each of them getting used to the feel of the other, but Erwin was tumbling down a rabbit hole so steep he couldn't keep track of up from down, and Levi kept pressing back, kept moaning *Harder; harder*. Soon Erwin was fucking him like their lives depended on it, Levi crying out when Erwin's hands settled on his bruises, his cuts, then groaning his encouragement again and again. Time stuttered and spun out and the world became moans and flesh slapping against flesh, sweat and the coppery taste of blood, heat and muscle and bone.

With a shout, Erwin came, shaking and shuddering with the force of it. Levi pushed back against him, and Erwin realized he was stroking himself, his own body trembling. Seconds

later, Erwin could feel the orgasm rolling through Levi, could feel the way his ass shuddered and squeezed, milking his cock. It felt incredible, so incredible that he would fuck Levi again right now if he could, but his body was spent. He pulled out of Levi slowly, pulling off the condom and tying it off, leaning over to dump it in the trash.

With leaden limbs, he sank back into the mattress, pulling Levi with him. They lay there, a warm, languid tangle, until Levi whispered, “Smith?”

“Yeah?” Erwin grunted back, pulling himself back from the edges of sleep, “Whatisit?”

“Ya can’t stay here.”

Which was true; he needed to leave, needed to get home. “Jus’ gimme a’ minute, Levi, an’ I’ll go.”

Minutes passed, their breath slowing until it matched, each man’s chest rising and falling in time. Erwin felt the gentle warmth of sleep rolling over him just before Levi’s voice broke through the silence.

“We can’t ever do this again.”

# Sinnerman

## Chapter Summary

He drove to Levi's house, the lead in his belly almost lightened by the fluttering in his chest. Erwin didn't know how to handle this feeling, this dichotomy. Levi made him feel things he'd not known he was capable of feeling, amorphous but powerful, threatening to break him right open, but checked by the ache of reality. He would be a god damn fool to think that what he was doing was okay, and in the harsh light of morning, with Jackie's words still burning in his mind, with her touch still lingering on his skin, the feel of her lips still pressing into his, he felt the gravity of his situation for the first time. What had he expected to happen, really? Pursuing Levi wasn't a part of some grander plan or even something he'd bothered to think through. He wanted him, that was all. He'd wanted him for so long, and the more he worked by his side, the worse it got. He'd not considered the depth behind his lust until the night he found Levi on Pinwheel. After Arkansas—after seeing him bruised, cut, and bleeding, lying on the floor of that cabin, duct taped to a chair, after realizing how close he was to losing him—he finally understood. The only thing that could have stopped him was if Levi himself had said no, and he hadn't.

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!! I'm really overwhelmed by all of your kind words and comments, thank you! our comments, kudos, and messages mean so much to me <3 <3

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#), who also kindly beta'd this chapter when my usual beta got slammed with schoolwork <3

Enjoy!

*We can't ever do this again.*

The words echoed in Erwin's head as he drove Levi's truck through the dark, empty streets. It was well after midnight and the city was quiet. He tried to savor the feeling of fucking Levi, the filthy things he'd uttered and the way his body felt, but at the crescendo of every wave of remembrance, those words lapped at the shores of his memory, chilling him to the bone. He felt at odds with himself in a way he never had before. What he did with those boys in the woods was nothing. He never really felt remorse, because it was just a blow job here and there from a stranger. Those tricks were meaningless to him and he'd never fucked them, of course, so it was easy to shrug it all off as stupid, harmless, just sating an appetite.

But Levi...Levi wasn't just a pair of lips in the darkness. He was something else entirely, something that Erwin needed in ways that he couldn't quite define. His lust for Levi went beyond a thirst for his body and into the deepest part of him. In fact, it didn't really feel like lust anymore at all. As Erwin pulled into the driveway of the home he shared with his wife and children, as he looked at the moonlight reflecting off of their windows, he felt for the first time that he had truly been unfaithful.

He stepped out of the truck and shut the door as quietly as he could, walking toward the house like a man going to the gallows. He slid the key into the lock and just stood there, not quite able, not quite willing to let himself in. But he had no where else to go and with a sigh, he opened the door.

The house was dark and quiet, the girls and Jackie asleep in their respective beds. Erwin took off his shoes and stole around quiet as a thief, grabbing a towel out of the linen closet and heading to the bathroom for a quick shower. He flipped the light on and stripped out of his clothes, taking a moment to stare at his guilty face in the mirror. He counted two days of stubble, hair standing up three different ways, and one heavy purple shadow under each eye.

"Lookin' rough, Smith," he muttered to himself. He swallowed dryly and turned on the hot water, letting the room get steamy before he stepped under the spray of the water. He scrubbed at his skin with a bar of soap and the calluses of his fingers, trying to wash away two days of sweat and grime, the Arkansas woods, the stink of that little outbuilding and the heavy musk of sex. The filth permeated deeper than he expected and despite his best efforts, he felt the worst of it still clung to him.

Finally, he gave it up for loss, climbed out of the shower and toweled himself dry. His chest felt tight, his limbs weak, but the just the thought of climbing into bed with Jackie made him restless. Too tired to fight sleep anymore, he sought respite on the couch and barely had time to pull a blanket over himself before he fell asleep.

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The sun was still rising when Jackie shook him awake and pressed a cup of coffee into his hands. Erwin felt like he could have slept for at least another three weeks straight, but that clearly wasn't an option. Jackie's concern was written across her face, crinkling around her eyes, pressed into the set of her lips. Erwin frowned.

"Sorry I didn't...come ta bed'r nothin'. I got in late, didn't wanna wake ya."

"What tha hell happened?" She asked, ignoring his apology. "Last I heard Friday night you was goin' on some crazy trip, and I don't hear from ya all weeken', then ya show up in the middle of tha night las' night an' don't even tell me yer home...do you have any idea how scared I was?"

"Jacks, c'mon, I would'a called but it was...difficult. It was a whirlwind, really, but listen, we got our man, okay?"

Jackie covered her mouth, eyes wide. "Well...I...does that mean yer done with tha case?"

“Well, we still got evidence ta sort through but I mean...I sure hope that’s what it means.”

“That mean we get ta start plannin’ a vacation?”

Erwin shrugged. “I sure hope so, but I gotta go see what Pixis’ sayin’. It was a real horror show at the crime scene yesterday. I’m hoping the guy ain’t killed more people’n we found, but we’re gonna haft’a talk to ‘im.”

“Is Levi alright?”

“He got a little banged up, but he’ll be okay.”

“Are ya relieved?”

“In a manner’a speakin’, but Levi thinks there might be more’a them comin’.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure they ain’t gonna let us keep investigatin’ it if there is.”

“Well frankly, I don’t want ya investigatin’. I know it’s selfish, but...”

“It ain’t selfish,” Erwin said, and he was serious. Hearing Jackie call herself selfish was, at this point, painful.

“Yer comin’ home tonight, then?”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, chest aching, “I should be.”

Jackie smiled, and Erwin tried to smile back. “Good. I’ll make up some dinner, then. Be home around seven?”

“Sure.”

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He drove to Levi’s house, the lead in his belly almost lightened by the fluttering in his chest. Erwin didn’t know how to handle this feeling, this dichotomy. Levi made him feel things he’d not known he was capable of feeling, amorphous but powerful, threatening to break him right open, but checked by the ache of reality. He would be a god damn fool to think that what he was doing was okay, and in the harsh light of morning, with Jackie’s words still burning in his mind, with her touch still lingering on his skin, the feel of her lips still pressing into his, he felt the gravity of his situation for the first time. What had he expected to happen, really? Pursuing Levi wasn’t a part of some grander plan or even something he’d bothered to think through. He wanted him, that was all. He’d wanted him for so long, and the more he worked by his side, the worse it got. He’d not considered the depth behind his lust until the night he found Levi on Pinwheel. After Arkansas—after seeing him bruised, cut, and bleeding, lying on the floor of that cabin, duct taped to a chair, after realizing how close he was to losing him—he finally understood. The only thing that could have stopped him was if Levi himself had said no, and he hadn’t.

What Levi had said was that they could never do this again; Erwin wasn't sure if he could accept that. When he considered Jackie, his girls, his entire community, his job...well, there wasn't any room for a fag in a world like that.

There was no future there, either, but what was the alternative? Growing old with a woman he loved but didn't want? What if Jackie met a man that could give her all of himself—his desire and passion—and left this farce behind? What if that happened ten years from now, Levi long gone, and Erwin was left alone? What if he gave up thirty years from now and became that old queen in the gay bars?

Erwin loved his girls, loved Jackie, loved his job. He had a good life. A happy life. He had friends and a community and people who valued his skills. Was all of that outweighed by the human hurricane with the storm-cloud eyes? But it wasn't just about Levi, of course. Playing straight for over three decades hadn't made it so, though he tried, goddamn it. That road held nothing for him.

He pulled up before that familiar apartment, his stomach clenching, heart thumping as he caught sight of Levi sitting on the porch, smoking. Erwin watched him stand up, trot over to the truck, struck dumb by the way he moved, even with his cuts and bruises. Levi swung up into the passenger side and parked his cigarette between his lips while he pulled on his seatbelt.

"Mornin'," he muttered. "Let's get yer car an' get in as quick as we can. I wanna see if I can talk ta Gabriel one las' time before Pixis crawls up our asses."

Erwin felt like his guts were falling out, and Levi was nothing but business as usual.

"Yeah, alright," he muttered, turning the truck around and heading for his car. The town was waking up, people leaving for work, big yellow school busses stopping at the corners. Erwin thought to himself that he should be grateful for Levi's pragmatism, but it was difficult. He wasn't one for talking out his feelings or horse shit like that, but just acting like it didn't happen...?

*It's for the best*, he told himself. He even did his best to believe it.

"I been thinkin' 'bout Caesar, 'bout whatever it is he's doin' with these kids. I'm pretty sure when we find 'im, we're gonna find Andrew Gutierrez's killer, an' s'more Ibis' an' Gabriel's. I got myself an' idea 'bout what 'e's doin' with'em, but I'm hopin' I'm wrong. I jus' need...I jus' need ta talk to Gabriel. I know 'e's insane but I think I know what questions ta ask ta get an answer."

"Maybe I can distract Pixis while ya talk ta Gabriel..." Erwin offered.

"We'll see. I don' think he's gonna be amenable ta bein' distracted."

"We caught our man, didn' we? Ya really think he's gonna be like that?"

"Ya think Nichol's an' his crew forgot about the whole thing jus' 'cause we caught our man?"

Erwin frowned. "I guess not. I mean...I jus' fig'gered Pixis'd be pretty lenient, all things considered."

Levi snorted. "Don' count on it, Erwin. Jus' 'cause yer good at gettin' away with shit don't mean yer gonna be able ta talk yer way outta this one."

"Well...we'll see, then, won't we?"

"Sure will."

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They retrieved Erwin's car without further conversation, and drove to the station separately. Erwin took the long way, picking up coffee and doughnuts to give Levi time to slip into the station undetected. When he arrived, Nanaba was getting out of her car. She waved him over and despite the fact that he felt ill, he grinned and strode toward her.

"Hey there, stranger," she said, "I see ya brought some treats."

"Well, I fig'gered there was some celebratin' ta do."

"Well, ya'll deserve it, don't ya? From what I gather it was a fuckin' madhouse yesterday..."

"Yeah well, mostly it was Levi, but I dunno how much of that story I'm supposed ta tell yet."

"I understand. Hey listen, can I ask ya somethin'?"

"Sure, Nana, shoot."

"All weekend it seemed like Mike had somethin' pressin' at 'im, but he wouldn' tell me what it was. Any ideas?"

"Not sure," Erwin lied with a shrug. "He didn' give ya no clues?"

"Nope," she said, "Only jus' when I suggested we try' ta find out what you an Jacks was up to, he snapped at me, which ain't...normal, fer him. So I thought maybe ya'll had a tiff."

"I'll try an' talk to 'im, Nana," Erwin promised, though his guts were sinking.

"Thanks, Smith."

They walked inside, Erwin accepting the back slaps and grins with a smile. "I can't believe ya'll caught 'im," Ness said. "Damn fine work!"

Even Nile slapped Erwin's back, congratulated him and offered to buy him a drink. They all descended on the doughnuts like men starved, except Mike, who slunk off without even sparing Erwin a glance. Erwin followed him, however, and found him in the break room.

"Hey, hoss," Erwin said, handing him one of the coffees he'd brought. "Can I talk to ya?"

"No," Mike pushed the coffee away. "I ain't got nothin' ta say ta you."

“Hey, woah,” Erwin said, “You got it twisted up, Zacharius. I ain’t mad at ya, but I need you ta forget about all’a this now.”

“Why,” Mike asked, looking up at him, “So you can keep Jackie in tha dark?”

“She ain’t got nothin’ ta be in tha dark about.”

“You wanna bet?” Mike crossed his arms and looked down. “Erwin, ya been mah best friend fer a long time, an’ Nana an’ I both, we love you an’ Jackie an’ tha girls. Hell, you named me godfather ta Evey and Steph an’ that was one a’ the best gifts anybody ever gave me. But I can’t...preten’ like I don’t see ya throwin’ it all away. So don’...come ta me an’ ask me ta turn a blind eye because a can’t. I know what I smell on you an’ yer jus’....not gonna convince me that I don’t, okay?”

Erwin leaned forward, an elbow against the counter, and in a low voice, “Yer really gonna do this? Turn yer back on what...twenty years’a friendship ‘cause ya got some bug up yer ass about my personal life?”

“Let’s get one thing clear,” Mike said, standing up to his full height, letting his arms fall to his sides. “You may wanna lie ta me about fuckin’ yer partner, an’ whatever, but I’ve known you was a homo since we was in high school, even though ya never told me. I fig’gered it out when I kep’ smellin’...stuff on ya. An’ I thought when ya met Jackie, you might chill the fuck out. But ya didn’. But I never said nothin’, Smith, ‘cause I fig’gered it weren’t my place. But now, yer playin’ with fire an’ it’s obvious somethin’s changed. An’ I’m willin’ ta bet I ain’t the only person’s noticed.”

Erwin straightened up and opened his mouth to respond, but Mike held up a hand and went on.

“I don’t really give a shit what yer about ta say, Erwin. Jus’...don’t come ta me when this shit hits tha fan. A man’s gotta...gotta know ‘is own limits, an’ I ain’t gonna be here for that.” With that, he turned and walked out.

Erwin felt like someone had gutted him. He stood there trying to gather the pieces of himself back up for a moment, head snapping up when the door opened. It was Levi.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Erwin hissed out, angrier than he’d intended.

“Jesus, Smith, untwist yer panties. I got kicked outta holding, they told me ta come see Pixis.”

“Sorry,” Erwin said, scrubbing his hand over his face. “It ain’t been a very good mornin’.”

“Yeah well, I don’ think it’s gettin’ any better.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“They wont show me no evidence from tha crime scene. Barely’ let me talk ta Gabriel. I don’t think I’m gonna be aroun’ here much longer.”



“What?” Erwin asked, incredulous.

“It’s alright,” Levi shrugged, grabbing the coffee Erwin had brought for Mike and drinking down several large gulps of it. “Maybe it’s fer tha best.”

“Wha’s that supposed ta mean?”

“Nothin’. Don’t worry about it.”

“No...no, that ain’t nothin’. Why’re ya bein’ so damn cagey? What’d Gabriel say?”

“Oh, I didn’ get much outta him. More’a tha same, really. Jus’...let’s see what ol’ Pixis has ta say, then we can go from there.”

“Whaddya think Pixis’ gonna do?”

“I dunno, but I know we’re gettin’ taken off this case.”

“Are ya ready fer that?”

“I’d like ta see tha evidence they found first.”

“Then I got an idea, if we got any friends left here,” Erwin said, mouth setting into a grim line. “C’mon.”

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“Erwin! Levi!” Annette chirped, brows raised. “I wasn’ expectin’ ya’ll.”

“Oh yeah?” Levi asked, “An’ why’s that. This’ our case, ain’t it?”

“Is it?” Annette asked simply. “A lil’ bird told me ya’ll was off this case.”

“Not yet,” Erwin replied with an easy smile. “What’d ya’ll get from that crime scene?”

“Well,” Annette said, walking over to a counter covered in evidence bags, “We got a lot. It’s gonna take awhile ta process, but I’ll show ya’ll the good stuff. First of all, we got ourselves ‘bout fifty a’them lil’ clay men.”

“Any genitals on ‘em?” Levi asked.

“Nope, scraped off. He also got ‘imself a Bible. An’ he’s scribbled in it like crazy. Might be worth a look.”

“Anythin’ else?”

Annette leaned toward them and spoke in a hushed tone, “None’a them tabs, just so yer aware.”

“He must’a moved ‘em all,” Levi muttered to Erwin, who nodded. “Alright, ‘nette, can we take a look through that there Bible?”

“Technically, no. I’m gonna go get some coffee, an’ I never saw ya’ll here. Got it?”

“Thank ya, ma’am,” Erwin said with a smile.

“An’ Levi?” Anette said, her gaze lingering on his face, “Don’ let them cuts go untended. I’d hate ta see yer sweet lil’ face all scarred up, huh?” With that, she waved and walked out the door.

“At least we still have some friends ‘round here,” Levi muttered, moving over to the bag that held the Bible and slipping on his gloves.

“Fer now,” Erwin added.

“Yeah well, we got ‘till we get back ta tha station ta get all tha info we can.”

“Look, Levi, maybe it’s better we were off’a this case anyway, huh? We caught our guy, we know it’s him...”

Levi whipped around and looked up at him, incredulous. “What the hell’re you talkin’ about?” he hissed, “You know as well as I do this shit ain’t over ‘till we find this fuckin’ ‘Ceasar’ guy. What about Andrew, Smith? What about that little boy we found *raped* and *murdered*? What about Ibis? Whaddya think he did ta her ta make ‘er that way? You wanna give this guy a chance ta get away jus’ ‘cause we’re gettin’ pressure on us from tha top?”

Erwin swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

“Look, if yer worried about losin’ yer job, then wash yer hands’a this an’ move on. But don’t get in my way, Smith, because I ain’t stoppin’ ‘till Ceasar’s locked up ‘r dead, an’ I don’t really care which one or who I gotta piss off along tha way. Now c’m on, we don’t got long an’ I think I’m onta somethin’.”

With that, he opened the evidence bag and pulled out the Bible. Erwin stood and stared for a moment, shocked, but he wasn’t about to let Levi work this case alone. The two of them read in silence, Levi flipping through the pages, Erwin looking over his shoulder.

The Bible hardly resembled its original form. Gabriel had used it as something akin to a sketchbook, amending pages by scribbling through some passages and circling others, providing his own illustrations in ballpoint pen, drawing out the violence as it happened in the text in painstaking detail. When the angel Gabriel appeared, his name would be circled, the passage covered in several stunningly twisted self-portraits. The pages that Levi lingered on the longest were those in which Gabriel had scribbled his own footnotes, cramped and relegated to the margins.

“This shit sounds familiar, like it’s from a movie ‘r somethin’,” Levi finally murmured. “I need copies.”

“I dunno if we can make copies,” Erwin muttered, already scanning the empty lab for intruding eyes. “I don’ wanna get Netty in trouble.”

“Netty doesn’t know shit ‘bout this far as we’re all concerned, remember? I need ta write some things down. Go find a copier and get as much of this as ya can.”

Erwin set his jaw reluctantly but obliged, walking off down the hall until he found an empty office. The door was ajar, so he slipped in and made his way straight for the copier. It was time consuming, and he’d only gotten about ten pages done when the door swung open.

“Hey Smith, what’re ya doin’ here?”

Erwin recognized the tech, but he couldn’t remember the man’s name. He’d been out of the field long enough that they didn’t work together on a regular basis, and Erwin knew he didn’t have any rapport with this one. He smiled as breezily as he could.

“Hey there. Jus’ makin’ copies. Sorry ta use yer office, but it didn’ look like you was needin’ it right now.”

“Sorry, I jus’ thought you was offa this case?”

“Nope, nope. Finishin’ up a few more things ‘fore we hand it off fer processin’. Jus’ makin’ sure we ain’t leavin’ any loose ends.”

“Oh, well...I’m sure my techs can handle that, can’t they?”

“The techs ‘re very competent,” Erwin agreed, gathering up the Bible and the copies he’d made. “I jus’ wanted a couple’a things ta take over ta Pixis specifically. Anyway, thanks fer lettin’ me use the copier. Have a good one!”

He strolled past the man and into the hallway as quickly as he could without looking suspicious. He was almost to the lab when he saw Levi slinking out of the doors. “We gotta go,” Erwin hissed quietly. “C’mon, Levi.”

“Didya get them copies?”

“I got what I could, get out to tha car, I’ll put up the Bible.”

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They drove back to the station slowly, stretching the drive from its usual five minutes to about thirty. Erwin drove, Levi chattering and smoking up a storm.

“Okay, so, when we found Andrew, nobody could fig’ger why he’d be covered in that cream, right? An’ ‘e’d been raped an’ killed. Now remember tha ice cream truck? It was scrubbed clean but it’d been bought years earlier, in cash, offa some junkyard. An’ I told ya he’d been using it fer years an’ that was ‘is contingency. Well Andrew fought back, you remember? But kids don’ always fight back, specially when they’ve been sexually assaulted. What if Ceasar wasn’ used to it? Andrew fought back an’ Ceasar killed ‘im, an’ didn’t mean to? So he had ta take care’a tha evidence, see? But before ‘e killed Andrew, he had time ta do his other ritual...tha skin cream. Maybe he saw a lil’ kid with skin an’ hair an’ eyes as dark as Andrews an’ wanted a challenge, see? Anyway, he puts tha cream on ‘im, then he fights back so he kills ‘im, panics, dumps ‘im, and scrubs the truck out fer us ta find.

“So maybe, then, Andrew was a failure ‘cause he wasn’ ‘obligin’”. But what about tha ones that didn’t fail? Ibis. Matilda Macarty. He got ‘er, an’ started smearin’ her over with tha cream, bleachin’ ‘er hair, feedin’ ‘er drugs, all that. He...kep’ ‘er while she was still young, an’ then, an’ listen up, Smith, this is vital, she hit seventeen. An’ ‘e dumped her. An’ Gabriel...remember how scared ‘e was’a growin’ old? That was tha tipoff, now, he didn’ wanna grow old that’d make ‘im useless. Listen, Smith, we been thinkin’ he was brainwashin’ and trainin’ killers, but that ain’t it. He’s keepin’ these kids while they got some value to ‘em, fucker needs ‘em young. Then ‘e’s dumpin’ ‘em out when they get too old ta suit ‘is tastes. They ain’t trained killers, Smith, they’re jus’ former show ponies turned to broken down ol’ nags with nothin’ left ta offer Cesar. So he tosses ‘em out an’ looks fer a new model, but they’re so broken they don’t know what else ta do. Think’a their situation with Caesar, whatever it is, as some sorta exoskeleton of...not sanity, but somethin’ like it. Somethin’ regulatin’. And when they get dumped out, that regulation is lost, an’ then they just spiral out. ‘Cause they ain’t what he wants anymore but damn, they jus’ do what they know, try for his grace again. But it’s like with God; y’ jus’ keep livin’ like y’ think He intended, pleadin’ wi’ Him and beggin’ Him to notice and he ain’t even listenin’ to laugh at y-“

“Get to the point, Levi,” Erwin urged, fingers clenching around the steering wheel.

“My point is,” Levi said, taking a deep breath to steady himself, his heart racing, “They ain’t trained killers bein’ given orders ta kill, they’re dumped strays. Strays from tha same owner. An’ that owner’s been doin’ this fer probably upwards’a twenty years.”

Erwin’s eyes were wide, his knuckles white now. “An’ what if yer wrong?” he asked, but the lack of conviction in his tone betrayed him. Levi just scoffed.

“I ain’t.” he said simply.

“An’...during that time, while they’re ‘is ‘show ponies’...he’s got ‘em workin’ them sex parties?”

“He rapes ‘em, and then invites ‘is buddies, I’d guess.”

Erwin felt sick. “Are...yer sure?”

“Course I am, but I wouldn’t mind gettin’ s’more pieces ta this puzzle. An’ I think I know where ta get ‘im. You ready ta go after Nichols yet, or are ya still too chicken shit?”

Erwin frowned at the dig. “Yeah, I’m ready. After we talk ta Pixis.”

“Lemme make a phone call first,” Levi said, “I think we’re gonna need Ol’ Einstein again.”

Erwin didn’t ask why, his mind still spinning from the rest of Levi’s revelations. “Levi, how’d ya fig’ger all’a this out, anyhow?”

“I been piecin’ it together since Andrew. I learned a lot with Ibis, learned some from Ice, more from Gabriel. Jus’ detective work an’ knowin’ how people work. Speakin’ of, I hope ya understand we ain’t comin’ outta this meetin’ with Pixis in any kinda good shape.”

“Oh c’mon, Levi, ya really think that?”

“Didya see tha way they reacted to us in that lab there? Ya think Nichols an’ his boys want us sniffin’ any closer’n we already are? Nah, Smith, this ain’t gonna end on a happy note fer you or me. I hope yer ready fer that.”

Despite Levi’s dire predictions, Erwin still wasn’t convinced...until ten minutes later, when the two of them stood in Pixis’ office, Levi looking resolutely out the window, Pixis staring at them each in turn, his look leaving no room for generosity. Erwin felt his stomach drop.

“Chief, look, I got tha report to ya. I think the important thing ta keep in mind here is that we caught a murderer who would’a otherwise killed again.”

“Smith, what ya did was put yer fuckin’ nose up at every piece’a protocol you was supposed ta follow and go maverick. An’ then ya have tha arrogance to assume that ya ain’t gonna pay no consequences fer that?”

“We wouldn’ be,” Levi cut in, “If we weren’t steppin’ on no high an’ mighty toes.”

“Erwin, you best keep him quiet,” Pixis warned, all the smile gone out of his expression. “I dunno if ya realize tha kinda shit yer in, but trust me when I say, I’m doin’ this fer yer own good.”

“Doin’ what, exactly, chief?”

“Takin’ yer badge an yer sidearm. Place ‘em on the desk, now.”

Erwin nearly exploded, his mouth falling open in outrage, his hands clenching into fists. A diatribe was crawling up his throat when Levi’s hand grabbed his wrist and dug his short nails in hard.

“Yer suspended with pay, fer now, ‘til I get this shit sorted out. An’ you, Levi, I took ya on as a favor fer an’ old friend. I’d suggest ya start lookin’ ta transfer ta some place more suited to yer...unique sensibilities. People roun’ here don’ like tha way you operate. Call our friend, tell ‘im ta find a new place ta put ya. Clear?”

“Yup,” Levi said, undoing his sidearm and rolling up the belts. “Crystal.”

“Now go, an’ stop sniffing around on this. Smith, if yer lucky we’ll get ya back here in about two weeks. ‘til then, I suggest ya spend some time with yer family.”

Erwin pulled off his sidearm with shaking fingers, slammed his badge on the desk.

“Chief,” he said, hands in the air, “Ya know what? Fuck you an’ yer fuckin’ department.”

“C’mon, Smith,” Levi said, “That’s enough.”

Erwin locked eyes with Pixis, his mouth struggling to stay shut, but Levi grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the office.

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Erwin managed to keep his mouth shut until they got in the car, his whole body shaking with the effort of it. When Levi slammed his door behind him and lit up a cigarette, Erwin finally let loose a loud, long string of curses. Levi just nodded in silent agreement.

“Who tha fuck does he think ‘e is?” Erwin asked. Levi sighed out a stream of smoke. “I mean, I’ve worked fer that man fer a decade, now, an’ here he is threatenin’ my fuckin’ job? Where tha fuck does ‘e get off takin’ my badge? I mean what in that fuckin’ hell, Levi, did we catch ‘is fuckin’ murderer or not?” He continued in that vein as he drove a familiar route, damning Pixis and the whole department to hell with his rant. When they finally pulled up outside their usual bar, he sighed, more or less out of steam, and slammed his hands down on the steering wheel. Levi was quiet and cold throughout, waiting for Erwin to finish, smoking away. When Erwin’s rant ended, Levi reached up and pressed two fingers to his own pulse. Satisfied, he turned and looked at Erwin.

“Sure sucks when that trusty good ol’ boys club turns on ya, don’t it?”

With that, he slipped out of the car and slammed the door carelessly. Erwin huffed, but followed Levi into the bar anyway. They went through their usual routine, except Levi ordered two rounds of shots on top of their usual pitcher of beer while Erwin slid quarters into the jukebox. At the table, Erwin downed the two shots one right after the other and then shook his head roughly.

“Alright,” Levi said after throwing back one of his own shots. “I hope yer done bellyachin’, ‘cause we’re gonna need ta make a plan.”

“Yeah,” Erwin spat. He shook his head then offered a gentler, “Sorry.”

“S’alright. I know it comes as a shock tha firs’ time.”

“Oh yeah? When did it happen ta you?”

Levi snorted, “No one ever invited me, Smith. I just watched enough’a ya’ll fall from grace in my time. I know how it goes.”

Erwin nodded, poured their cups full. “Alright well, anyway. Next we go after Nichols, huh?”

“Yep, but I can guarantee you the man ain’t gonna wanna talk.”

“I think we can solve that.”

“A loaded gun usually does tha trick, but I’m bringin’ Hange in fer insurance.”

“An’ what’re they gonna do?”

“Target practice,” Levi offered with a smirk. “People don’ always believe yer gonna pull tha trigger, an’ ya can’t prove it without a hefty risk. But if ya shoot somethin’ they see as an extension of themselves, well...”

Erwin nodded, sipping at his beer. “We ask ‘im about tha alter...then about Caesar.”

“Yup, I’m gonna bet our pastor’s been at some’a them exclusive ren-dez-vous ol’ Ceasar’s throwin’. He’s gonna give us tha info we need ta track down Ceasar.”

“An’ then we’re goin after ‘im?”

“Looks like it.” Levi frowned, leaned in across the table. “Smith, I hope ya understand this ain’t...there ain’t no guarantees about this. We’re goin’ up against tha powers that be, an’ yer already one misstep away from losin’ yer job. An’...even if ya don’, turnin’ over this kinda thing can get ya run outta town, dependin’ on tha feathers ya ruffle.”

“Levi,” Erwin started, then scrubbed his hand over his mouth and sighed deeply. “Look, yer tellin’ me this bastard is kidnappin’ little kids, rapin’ ‘em, doin’ god knows what...whatever it is, he’s breakin’ ‘em so bad that when he dumps ‘em like old mutts, they start killin’. They way I see it...the way I see it, there comes a time where a man’s gotta show ‘is priorities. You almos’ gave yer life fer us ta find Gabriel. I fig’ger I can risk my job ta take down this sick fuck.”

His eyes moved up and found Levi’s, stormy and ever-inscrutable.

“Well,” Levi finally muttered, “That’s all I needed to hear.”

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Levi called Hange from a pay phone inside the bar, feeding it handfuls of quarters to cover the long distance. After that, they continued on planning until there was nothing left to plan anymore. Hange would arrive in the morning and until then, they were just burning time. It was dark outside when they wandered out of the bar and found Erwin’s car. They took the drive back to Levi’s apartment slow, laughing drunkenly for no reason at all.

As they neared Levi’s apartment, it struck Erwin that he wasn’t going to be able to stay with Levi, that he would need to drop him off, to drive away. The thought stuck heavy in his gut, and as he turned onto Levi’s street, he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Hey, Levi? Can I ask ya somethin’?”

“Shoot, Smith.”

“Didya mean what ya said las’ night? Didya really mean we can’t...do that again?”

Levi groaned and let his head fall back against the seat.

“I ain’t...I just,” Erwin tried to think of a way to justify himself, but the silly drunken laughter was draining out of him, replaced by a gut-wrenching need.

“I know what yer sayin’, an’ ya know exactly why we can’t...Erwin, I told ya you were a tickin’ time bomb but I don’ wanna be the one that blows up yer marriage. Jacks is a friend’a mine, ya know. It ain’t right. You need ta get yer shit together, but I don’ wanna be caught up in tha middle of whatever you got comin’.”

Erwin pulled the car to a stop outside of Levi's apartment and parked, his silence the only answer he offered.

"Alright, Smith," Levi muttered, and though it was meant to be a statement, it came out more like a question. "I'll see ya tomorrow. Bright an' early."

Levi got out of the car, and Erwin almost let him go, but after Levi's door slammed, Erwin cursed, struggled out of his seatbelt, and pushed himself out of the car. "Wait, Levi," he said, grabbing at Levi's arm.

"What?" Levi asked, letting Erwin's hand close around his bicep. "What is it?"

Erwin yanked his arm, throwing him off balance. Levi was forced to grab for purchase, his hands fisting in Erwin's shirt. "Asshole," he growled, but Erwin was pressing him back against the car, dipping his face down toward Levi's. His lips stopped just short of Levi's, waiting for acknowledgement, admission, anything. A beat passed before Levi was surging up to claim what Erwin offered, Erwin's hands cupping his face, careful of his cuts despite the electricity shooting through him. "God dammit," Levi growled into Erwin's lips, "God damn you, Erwin Smith." Erwin just smiled against the hungry nip of Levi's teeth and deepened the kiss. Somewhere, tires squealed, but if either heard it, neither acknowledged the sound. Their hands, their lips, their minds were occupied.

Levi broke away from the kiss, panting, pushing Erwin away.

"Go home," he said, but his tone was venomless. "I ain't fuckin' you tonight. Go home, Erwin."

Erwin nodded, licked his lips, sighed. "Yeah...I guess it's for the best." He cupped Levi's cheek in his hand one more time, running his other hand through Levi's silky dark hair. Levi pulled away, walked up to his door, and let himself in without turning around. Erwin leaned back against his car, looked up at the stars. The sky was so vast and black it bordered on hopeless, but the stars... they still burned and though his limbs were heavy with drink, his chest felt so hollow, he thought he could drift up into them.

"What're ya doin'?" he whispered into the night. "The hell're ya doin'?"



# Boy With a Broken Soul

## Chapter Summary

And then...and then there was Levi. A stormcloud, a hurricane, a bolt of lightening that pierced through the careful constructions of the life that Erwin had spent so long manufacturing for himself and set it all aflame. Levi had refused to let him lie and had thus burnt away the dross of his deceptions until all that remained, really, was Erwin. He'd not even realized how sad and naked he would be without that complicated framework to cover his every move, every thought, every decision. The lies had become just as much a part of him as the truths, so deeply ingrown in the fabric of his identity that it took a flame to expose what was real and what was manufactured.

## Chapter Notes

Hello Everyone!

School has started and I'm on the quarter system, so it's very intense! I'm doing my best to keep up the once-per-week schedule, but I can't make any promises....I'm sorry! :c I originally meant this fic to be finished before school began (it was supposed to be my summer project) but I've got about three and a third chapters left to write. I'll do my best, but I hope that you all can stand to be patient with me!

Also, the lovely tumblr user sweetlittlevampire made [this fanart](#)!!! It's a gorgeous illustration of the last chapter. Check it out!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

At seven, Jackie walked past the front door and looked out of the window, scanning the street for Erwin's car. At seven-fifteen, she called the station, but the operator who answered told her that everyone had gone home for the day. At seven-thirty, she called Marie, who told her Nile said Erwin had stormed out of the office that afternoon and that, supposedly, he'd been stripped of his badge and service arm. At seven forty-five she called Mike, but he didn't answer. At eight, she finally fed the girls, neither of whom asked about Erwin; they were used to him being gone. By nine, she'd done the dishes, cleaned the kitchen, and had two beers. She didn't want to believe what her gut was telling her—that Erwin was seeking solace in some other woman's arms—but she needed to know. She had to know.

With shaking hands, she dialed Levi's number at around nine-thirty, after putting the girls to bed. There was no answer. One more phone call later, she had the neighbor come over to sit in the house and make sure the girls were okay while she offered excuses about a friend having a crisis and needing her. By ten, she was knocking at Levi's door again and again, but to no avail. Exhausted, guts churning, she leaned against his door, tears slipping silent down her face. She didn't want to put Levi on the spot, didn't want to make him feel like he was being forced in the middle of her marital issues, but what choice did she have? Erwin didn't seem to be keeping close with any of his other friends lately, and if he had someone else, Levi was the only one she was almost sure would know. So instead of going home, she sat in the car and sipped on a beer she'd brought with her, waiting.

When Erwin's car ambled down the street, she recognized it immediately. Flooded with relief, she almost started to laugh—he'd just been out drinking with Levi. Normally, the fact that he'd missed dinner to go out drinking might have left her frustrated, annoyed, but the alternative was so much worse that this seemed genuinely mild by comparison. She was already rationalizing it to herself, thinking that truly, he must have had a difficult day today, that he needed the relaxation, to blow off that steam. Now he would come home and she would care for him, they could take a vacation, put this whole damn case behind them. She turned on the car, anxious to get home before he did so that he wouldn't realize she'd been gone.

But then he was getting out of the car, and Jackie stopped, her hand on the gearshift, and watched as her husband pulled Levi in toward him, backed him up against the car. She could tell from his body language exactly what was about to happen but still her mind denied it, pushed it away, as though if she looked hard enough, it wouldn't be happening at all. And yet there he was, her husband, kissing his male partner. Deeply. Tenderly. In a way she wasn't sure he'd ever kissed her.

Her foot slammed against the gas and she sped off as fast as she could, tires squealing.

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Erwin walked up to his house exhausted, tired, and vaguely ill. He wished he'd drunk more, or that Levi hadn't made him go. At the same time, this was his home, and he knew that he hadn't been around enough lately, or certainly not as often as he should have been. His bedroom light was still on, so Jacks must've still been up.

*Jacks.*

"Oh, fuck," he muttered, belatedly remembering his promise from that morning, checking his watch in vain optimism. It was eleven-thirty. "Fucking shit fuck fuck fuck," Erwin whispered, trying to get his keys sorted out, turn them in the locks. He finally made it inside, walking as quietly as he could to his bedroom. Part of him hoped that Jackie had fallen asleep with the lights on, that they could discuss his lateness in the morning, but the closer he got, the clearer it became that she was awake, moving about the room. He walked through the doorway, a thousand apologies on his tongue, but he was struck dumb by the sight before him.

Suitcases sat on the bed, side by side, with damn near every item of clothing he owned shoved into them. Jackie's face was covered in tears, her mouth set into a frown, and though he was sure she saw him, she just kept going, throwing shirts and slacks into suitcases indiscriminately.

"Jacks, woah," Erwin started, speaking from the doorway, "What tha hell're ya doin'?"

"Don't even fuckin' start," she hissed, her whisper worse than a yell.

"I didn' mean ta miss dinner, baby, it was a helluva day. I didn' think ya'd get so upset. Listen, I'm sorry, will ya stop throwin' my clothes around?"

She stopped, parked her hands on her hips, and scoffed at him from across the room. "Erwin Smith, this is so far from bein' about dinner. You really think I'd kick yer ass to tha curb over a missed dinner? Jesus christ, Erwin, we been married fer thirteen an' a half years an' ya still ain't never bothered to get to know me, huh?"

Something was twisting and pulling inside Erwin, something deep and dark, but he wasn't ready to give into it, to admit to it, to accept the scene before him. Surely she didn't know. This couldn't be about that. There was no way she could know about that.

"Don't tell me you been talkin' ta Mike," Erwin said, palms sweating, hands clenching into fists. "That bastard..."

"What? This ain't got nothin' ta do with Mike. This is all about you an' yer..." her voice halted, chin quivering for a moment before she balled up the shirt she was holding and shoved it into the suitcase with violent force.

"My what?" Erwin asked, his voice rising slightly. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't happening.

"Three days ago I asked ya if there was someone else an' you fuckin' lied ta me, Erwin, but what's worse? What's even worse? Is you been fuckin' lyin' ta me since tha day you met me."

"Jacks, honey, I dunno what yer thinkin', but I ain't been lyin' ta you like that, I ain't like that." Erwin was pleading, pleading with her to believe him, still standing in the doorway of the room they shared.

"I should'a fig'ered it out," Jackie said, shoving the last of his clothes into the suitcase. "Ya know it ain't normal fer a married man ta be so...uninterested in fuckin' 'is wife. I didn' wanna...I jus' fig'ered ya had a low drive'r somethin', but I should'a fuckin' known. *God*, ya made a fool outta me."

Her words were punching straight through him and, for the first time in his life, he found himself completely speechless.

"I jus' wish...I jus' wish ya hadn't lied." She whispered, zipping the suitcase closed. "God damnit, Erwin Smith, I wouldn'a cared that you was...that you..." she swallowd, "I

wouldn'ta cared that you was gay. I wouldn'ta married you, I wouldn'ta had yer kids, I wouldn'ta staked my whole life on ya, but I wouldn'ta *cared*. We could'a been friends, Erwin. I still would'a loved you."

When she looked up, her eyes were filled with tears, but the set of her jaw was strong, and when she continued, her voice didn't waver. "But ya fuckin' lied ta me. You been lying ta me since we met almost twenty years ago. Yer vows were a lie, yer love was a fuckin' lie, everything about you was built on a god damn lie. And you know what, I fell for it. I ate it up hook, line, and sinker because I *loved* you, Erwin Smith. An' no matter how much you was gone, an' no matter how little ya touched me, no matter how rarely ya fucked me, I loved you, I tol' myself that I chose you and I ain't gonna complain about a bed I made myself. I thought you was strong, a good man, a good father. I didn' take you fer a liar, Erwin. I sure as hell never fuckin' took ya fer a coward."

"Jacks?" Erwin shuddered out, winded by the force of her words, by the steel in her gaze. "I don'...I don' understand. Ya got it all wrong, honey, you..."

"Stop it!" She yelled at him, her whole body shaking. "Stop *fuckin'* lying! It ain't gonna work anymore, can't you fuckin' see that? I saw you! I know! There ain't no lie that's gonna get ya outta this one, honey, it's too fuckin' late fer that. Jus'...take yer things an' go! And don't fuckin' try ta come back, neither, because I ain't gonna have ya."

"But..." Erwin felt like he was moving through molasses, body and mind. He couldn't think, couldn't understand, couldn't accept what was happening. He felt like he was looking at himself from another plane, watching his poor, broken self slumping there in the doorway, leaning on the frame for support as his wife cried and yelled. "Where...am I supposed ta go, Jacks?"

"Does it look like a give a shit?" Jackie yelled back, then stopped, closed her eyes. "Erwin, where you go, what you do, who you fuck, that ain't my problem anymore. That's yer problem. So be a big boy an' fig'ger it out yerself."

"But..." He fought for words, for reasoning, but his mind was spinning, he felt faint. "Jacks, ya can't...you...what about our girls?"

"How about ya ask Levi about that," Jackie shot back, and finally, her tone held some true venom, something beyond hurt or anger. "How about ya ask him what ta do about yer family, huh?"

"Levi?" Erwin asked, stunned.

"Yes, Levi, yer partner, the one yer fuckin'. The one I invited into our house. The one I thought was *my fuckin' friend*, ask him what ta do about yer poor fuckin' family now that yer stupid blind wife knows yer a fag." She pulled the suitcases off the bed, shoved them toward Erwin, who still stood in the doorway dumbly. "Well, go on."

"You can't...we've...Jackie..."

"Don't fuckin' tell me I can't, Erwin. Just fuckin' go."

“But Jackie...”

“Go, Erwin.”

Erwin turned, obedient at first, but two steps down the hallway and he was coming back, pushing past the door just as Jackie tried to shut it.

“Wait,” he said, “Jus’...wait a minute, Jacks. You can’t possibly...what about our girls? What about this house? Our life? I’ve loved you every day since I met you and I love you still, and I ain’t willin’ ta give you up, Jacks, can ya just....can ya just listen to me fer a minute? I got a problem. I’m sick, okay? But I can get help. They got....help fer things like this. Fer people like me. Just give me some time, okay?”

Jackie stared at him, brows furrowed, then she sighed. “Erwin, do ya love me?”

“Yes, you know I do, Jacks. C’mon, you know I do.”

She drew a shuddering breath, swallowed, and asked, “Erwin, do ya wanna fuck me?”

He hesitated, and though the silence couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, it felt like a lifetime.

“That’s all I needed to know,” She said, voice cracking on the last syllable, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Go, now.”

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Startled awake by a knock at the door, Levi pulled the handgun from beneath his pillow. Sleep fell off his limbs quickly; a practiced and often necessary skill. Silent feet carried him to the door, where he took a moment to peek through the peephole.

*Oh.*

With a sigh, he clicked the safety on and tucked the gun into his pants before opening the door.

“What tha hell’re ya doin’ here? I damn near shot you.”

Erwin looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot and glassy, and Levi frowned. “Ya alright? Is Jackie an’ tha girls okay?”

Erwin opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, and shook his head.

“What tha hell? What happened? Erwin, spit it out, god dammit...”

“She kicked me out.”

“What?”

“Jacks kicked me out. She...she knows. About you. About us. She knows about...what we did.”

“What?” Levi was having trouble processing, but he pulled Erwin inside anyway, shut and locked the door, and then stalked to the kitchen. “How could she know? Who else knows? You, me...”

“And Mike.”

“Mike?”

“He...well, he smelled you on me.”

“That’s creepy as fuck, but I don’t...Mike isn’t the type to squeal.”

“She said she saw us.”

“But we...” Levi’s eyes went wide, his mouth pressing into a thin line. “Tonight...she must’a seen us.”

The thought had occurred to Erwin too, of course, but he hadn’t wanted to say it.

“God dammit...” Levi muttered. “Smith, I told ya I didn’ want ta be involved in this, and I ain’t.”

Erwin snorted, shook his head. “You gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me. I asked you when you was sober if ya wanted ta be fucked an’ you said yes. You said *yes*, Levi, so yer involved whether ya wanna be or not.”

Levi pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and took a deep drag. “I said yes. You instigated.”

“Oh yeah? Like ya weren’t throwin’ yerself at me a few days before? Those fuckin’ drawings in that sketchbook a yers, I know ya been wantin’ this fer a long time, and you said *yes*, Levi, which means whatever we did, you was just as responsible for it as I was. You wanted it.”

Levi sucked a drag off the cigarette and shook his head. “The fuck you want from me, Erwin? I can’t take it back, now, not anymore’n you can, so whad’ya want me ta do?”

Erwin opened his mouth, shut it again, and shook his head. “I...I don’t know, Levi, I...” *need you*, but he was having trouble saying the words. It was an admission, a desperate sort of admission, and Erwin didn’t care to be desperate. “Well, you know...” then, another flash of anger shot through him and he slammed his hand on the wall. Levi just stared at him. “Don’t you fuckin’ understand? I’m...I might be losin’ my family, my life, my job, everything I got, an’ here you are, askin’ me what the fuck I want from you? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Like ya got inta this not knowing the kind’a person I am? Like you fucked me thinkin’ I was gonna have some kinda emotional revelation? I told ya over an’ over again that I didn’ wanna be involved, but you weren’t havin’ none of it. An’ yeah, okay, I fuckin’ said yes because I wanted you, Erwin, I wanted to feel your big cock shoved up my ass, I wanted ta feel ya

come inside me. An' I also told ya I didn't wanna be here when yer marriage blew up. Yer the one that kissed me tonight...if ya'd had tha good sense not ta kiss yer parter right out in the open where everybody could see, maybe this wouldn'a happened."

"Is that it?" Erwin asked, head tilted, hand clenched into a fist. "Ya jus' wanted ta fuck? Nothin' more'n that?" He stepped toward Levi who backed up until he hit the kitchen counter, his back resting against it. Erwin towered over him, looking down at him with a hardened gaze. Levi studied him, then, remembered the way he'd stood before him like this in the halls of the police station after he interrogated Ibis. The memory of it sent a thrill down his spine but he pushed it away. It was inappropriate.

"Levi," Erwin said, his voice low. "Are ya really tellin' me ya don't feel nothin' else? Are ya tellin' me ya didn' want anythin' 'cept one quick fuck? That's it?"

Yes. Levi wanted to say it. He knew it would gut Erwin if he did and, if delivered just the right way, Erwin would never speak to him again. He could finish this case without him, or die trying. He knew that if he said it, Erwin would crawl back to his wife, his family, his life, his lie, and Levi would be free to move on, to leave this Erwin Smith behind and get on with living, or dying, or whatever the hell he was doing. It was just like that moment in the bathroom, really, the moment where Erwin had pressed his lips against the hard plane of Levi's stomach. He could have stopped it then. He could have prevented all of this. He could stop it now, too, before it got any worse, before things were broken irrevocably.

He tried to huff out a sigh, but his breath hitched and he dropped his gaze. Erwin's eyes were making him feel itchy, jumpy, restless. "What tha hell am I s'posed ta say?" he said, voice barely above a whisper. "Do you want yer life back er not, Smith? If ya do, then go...get on outta here an' go back to yer wife. I can't make ya no guarantees but yer a smooth talker. Forget about me, go back ta her. Go back ta what ya were before ya knew me."

Erwin was silent, staring down at him. Levi fidgeted, crossing his arms, tapping his fingers. Finally, he pushed past Erwin and grabbed his cigarette out of the tray, making his way into the living room. "I ain't a good bet, Smith. If ya had an ounce of sense in that big dumb head a yers, you'd know that already. If ya want yer life, yer wife, yer job, yer girls...then go back an' get 'em. Don't give that shit up fer me."

Levi put his cigarette out and sat on his mattress. "Hange's gonna be here firs' thing an' it's late. You can stay here if ya want."

Erwin's expression was difficult to read. There was pain, there, a deep pain that Levi recognized with such ferocity that he had to force himself to ignore it. There was something else, as well, though it was difficult to define. Finally, he said, "So you feel it too?"

Levi groaned and slumped onto his mattress. "You really don' quit, do ya?"

"Not on this."

Levi sighed deeply, heavily, and then, staring pointedly at the wall, he muttered, "No, it wasn' jus' a fuck. But," he sat up again, leveled his gaze at Erwin. "But that don't mean yer mind's made up. I can tell yer fuckin' terrified. Yer gonna need ta reflect on what kinda life

you want...because if ya wanna be stable, calm, an' complacent the way you always been, you sure as hell ain't gonna find that with me."

"I know," his voice was soft, almost gentle. It made Levi furious.

"So go fuckin' contemplate then, an' fig'ger out which bed you wanna lay in. All I know is that 'both' ain't gonna be an answer fer you anymore."

Erwin rubbed his hand over his mouth, swallowed hard, and nodded. "Fine," he muttered. Then with a heavy sigh, he grabbed a spare blanket and trudged out of the room. Levi could hear him take a bottle out of the liquor cabinet and walk slowly up the stairs. The loneliness of those footsteps was overwhelming, and though a part of Levi ached to go to him, he knew that would never do. Erwin had to make his own choices, now, and for his own sake as much as Erwin's, Levi couldn't have anything else to do with it.

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"Goooooooooooooood mornin'!" Hange said, their voice far too enthusiastic for six am. "Lookit you, Crash! Ya look like hell. But it ain't no matter, I brought ya some breakfast an' some coffee. You'll perk up in no time."

"Einstein," was all Levi managed, his voice still gravelly with sleep. He followed Hange as they traipsed down the hall toward the kitchen, remarking on his utterly unremarkable apartment.

"Oooh, stairs? You have stairs in your apartment? Wow, Crash, ain't that fancy?"

"Ain't half as fancy as yer place."

"True. Speakin' of, ya gonna come see me again soon?"

"Hange, if I show my face 'round those parts again, I'll get taken out so fast..."

"Alright, calm down, Jesus. When's Big Man gettin' here?"

Levi sighed, digging through the pile of drive-thru breakfast sandwiches Hange had dumped on the kitchen counter. "Well...truth be told, he's already here."

Hange's eyes went wide. "Yeah? He livin' with you now?"

"I dunno, he just stayed here last night."

"So yer fuckin', then?"

Levi huffed and took a scalding gulp of coffee.

"Mmmhmm," Hange said, looking him up and down. "I knew it. I know ya too well ta miss it. Well congrats, homewrecker."

"Don't fucking call me that. An' don't...*don't* bring it up aroun' him."



“Sore subject?”

“Look, Hange, his wife kicked ‘im out las’ night. I dunno what’s gonna happen or where we’re goin’, so just...don’t fuckin’ push, okay?”

They held their hands up and shrugged before grabbing a breakfast sandwich of their own.

“So, what’re tha chances I get ta actually shoot this guy?”

“More or less nil.”

Hange frowned.

“He jus’ needs tha fear’a god put in’im. How long can ya stick around? I might need ya fer somethin’ else, dependin’.”

“I gotta go home tonight. I don’t get much free time these days. Ya need me, gimme a call an’ I’ll drive down here just as fast as I can.”

Levi nodded.

“What’d I miss?” Erwin’s voice was rough, and as he came into the kitchen Levi could see his bloodshot eyes, the scruff on his face. Levi swallowed, looked away, shrugged.

“Nothin’ much. Hange brought some breakfast an’ coffee.”

“Thanks,” Erwin nodded toward Hange, grabbed a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and leaned his hip against the counter.

“Yer welcome,” Hange smiled. “Now, tell me ‘bout this guy.”

“He’s a pastor, jus’ a tiny church but he thinks he’s hot shit. His watch could pay my salary for a month with some left over, that kinda thing. ‘e’s got a car ‘e seems attached to...”

“Ahhh,” Hange said, nodding. “Good. Make sure ya get ‘im out close to it.”

“Of course.”

“Big Man, yer really gonna be complicit in this criminal activity?”

Erwin shrugged. “Don’t see as I have much of a choice, honestly. We gotta stop this guy one way or another.”

“That’s the spirit!” Hange grinned. Levi just lit up a cigarette and smoked in silence.

“Well,” Erwin finished his sandwich and picked up another. “When’re we goin’ over there?”

“Lucky fer us,” Levi said, “Ol’ Nichols likes ta commune with nature in tha mornin’. He’s gotta cabin on tha river south’a here where he likes ta go an’ do whatever it is crooked preachers do. He should be there now.”

Hange clapped their hands together, their grin splitting wide across their face. “Well, what’re we waitin’ for? This’ gonna be a blast!”

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They rode in Levi’s truck in silence, Levi smoking while he drove, Erwin staring out the window. They were both well aware of the need to focus. Talking about anything aside from the case would only interfere. As it stood, there was a rift between them that felt palpable.

A few words from Erwin would either tear them apart or push them together in ways that neither of them had really been prepared to consider. Erwin did his best to clear his head. Did his best not to consider Levi and everything that he meant. Did his best not to consider Jackie and his girls, his life, everything he might have already thrown away. He wondered if he’d thrown them away when he kissed Levi against the car, or when he’d buried himself in Levi’s ass, sweating and panting and cursing, or if he’d thrown his family away every day before that, right from the start. It terrified him to consider it, to dig into the pile of justifications he’d made, lies he’d told.

Levi had known, hadn’t he? It had been so long since that car ride back from the Gutierrez case, when Levi had challenged him for the first time. A few months later his boldness had increased, and he’d called Erwin for precisely what he was: a liar. At some point, it hadn’t felt like a lie anymore. He’d lost track because despite everything, it had just been a life. Walk the wrong road long enough and it begins to feel like the road you were always on.

Erwin recalled, vaguely, his own troubled feelings when he was a child, a teenager. He’d loved Mike once, alongside countless other boys. He’d fought it, tooth and nail, until he’d discovered the wonders of gay porn, echoes of other people in other cities who lived this way without shame, even when they were beaten or fired or worse. He hadn’t thought about it in so long, but now, driving down the highway surrounded by empty fields, he remembered a trip he’d taken...it had just been he and Mike, driving out to New Orleans after walking the stage at their high school graduation. They’d whooped and hollered the whole way there, armed with fake ID’s and a few poorly-rolled joints. Somewhere during the night, they’d been separated, Erwin finding himself pushed against a brick wall in some alley while a man at least thirty years older than him worshipped at the altar of his youth.

*You have it all*, the man had whispered, his hands running up Erwin’s tightly muscled body, *Youth, golden hair, blue eyes...like something from a myth*. Erwin had laughed at him, but the laughter stopped when the man took Erwin’s cock in his mouth, the culmination of all his boyhood fantasies on his knees there before him, much too old for Erwin but all the more skilled with his mouth for it. The next morning Mike had laughed and told him about the bars he’d ended up at, had asked him, *What happened, man?* and, in the retelling, that old man transformed into whatever type of girl Erwin assumed his friend would find impressive. By that time, the lies were already flowing from his tongue. They’d been flowing for so long.

They’d come back from that trip pretending to be men, no longer entangled by the trappings of boyhood, ready to take a summer doing manual labor to save up money and attend the police academy in the fall. Erwin had known, then, that he would marry Jackie, that they would have children and a life and that he would never, ever tell her about his problem, about the fact that he only touched her because he knew that he was supposed to, about how the

love he felt for her felt more like the love he would have imagined he would feel for a sister or a friend. Faggots had no future. That old cocksucking man had no future, getting his rocks off over the body of a strange young Adonis, relegated to filthy alleyways to get his fix even in a city as bright and beautiful and magical as New Orleans. Fags were worthless, were beaten, were murdered. They didn't become detectives...they didn't become anything. Erwin wasn't about to be a fag. He couldn't afford to.

He'd become a policeman, he'd saved up everything he could out of his meager salary and secured an apartment for himself and Jackie. She'd graduated nursing school and started up her work at the hospital and, after saving up for a few more years, they'd gotten married, bought their first home. He was happy, or he told himself that he was, even though he'd escaped the merrymaking at his own wedding reception long enough to get a sloppy blow job in a closet from a waiter who he never saw again. This was his life, now, this is what he'd wanted...after all, he'd worked so hard to secure it.

The girls came, one right after the other, and Erwin was sure he'd made the right choice. Children were a gift, a miracle, and he loved them so fiercely that they made every lie seem, in hindsight, at least mostly true. Maybe he wasn't the type to go for women, but here he was, a man with a family, and that meant that he was someone. That meant that he'd escaped the nothingness, the pain, the stigma that had haunted him since childhood. And he was grateful, too...that man in the alleyway had probably died of AIDS by now. Gay Cancer. God's judgement against fags of all kinds for their life of sin, or so he was assured from the pulpit, from the jeering laughs of the other officers. He'd narrowly escaped that death sentence, and had been given instead a family, a wife, a great career...all the trappings of success. So what if he snuck out to the woods to cruise every now and then? He was safe, always with a pack of condoms, never using a needle or anything else that would put him at risk. He was safe, thus his transgressions could be forgiven, forgotten, brushed over.

And then...and then there was Levi. A stormcloud, a hurricane, a bolt of lightening that pierced through the careful constructions of the life that Erwin had spent so long manufacturing for himself and set it all aflame. Levi had refused to let him lie and had thus burnt away the dross of his deceptions until all that remained, really, was Erwin. He'd not even realized how sad and naked he would be without that complicated framework to cover his every move, every thought, every decision. The lies had become just as much a part of him as the truths, so deeply ingrown in the fabric of his identity that it took a flame to expose what was real and what was manufactured.

He'd spent the night before wallowing in it, drinking, trying to separate out exactly when and where he'd gone wrong, and what to do next. He could beg Jackie to take him back, but whether or not she would...well. An illusion could be created but, once shattered, it could never be rebuilt. There would always be craggy edges where the lies became apparent, easily separated from the truths. If Jackie chose to take him back it would not be because she believed that she had been wrong about him, but rather because she found it preferable to join in on the lie, rather than to face the truth.

And Jackie was anything but a liar.

“Smith,” Levi broke through his thoughts in a cloud of exhaled smoke, and Erwin turned toward him. “I know yer thinkin’ a lotta thoughts right now, but I’m gonna need you ta focus. We’re gonna be there in about two minutes. Yer gonna approach him first, do yer good ol’ boy routine. Got it?”

“I know, Levi,” Erwin replied. “We already went over this.”

“Well, that was before yer life blew up, some I’m jus’ makin’ sure ya remember.”

“I do.”

“Well, good.”

A minute or so later they were pulling up outside a small, quaint little house, Nichol’s Lexus parked in the driveway. It sat just on the river, surrounded by land. Hange should already be parked on the other side of the river, situated with a rifle and scope.

“Ya ready?” Levi asked.

Erwin nodded.

“Well then, let’s go.”

They approached the house with ease, as if they’d been invited over for a drink, for a chat. Nichols must have heard them driving up—he was waiting inside the screen door.

“Hey there, pastor!” Erwin called out, trotting up the porch steps. “It’s a beautiful mornin’, huh? I hope we ain’t botherin’ ya too much, showin’ up unannounced.”

“It’s...fine,” the pastor said, pushing open the screen door and walking onto the porch to shake their hands. “How can I help you boys?”

“Well, it shouldn’t take too long, we just need ta ask ya about that altar in yer church...the one Lottie Jenkins was found on?”

“I’m sorry, boys, but I already told you that it was donated anonymously by a member of my congregation. I don’t have much else to say on the matter.”

“I appreciate the fact that yer in quite a difficult position here, pastor,” Levi drawled, lifting one hand in the air. “But I’m gonna need ya to cooperate.”

Nichols opened his mouth, a protest slipping off his tongue just as Levi’s hand dropped. A *pop* sounded from somewhere in the distance, and a heartbeat later, the driver’s side window of Nichol’s car shattered. Nichols yelled a curse, his eyes flying over across the river, but there was nothing to be seen.

“What was that? What are you doing? Smith, what’s the meaning of this?”

“I’d imagine that’s pretty clear,” Erwin shrugged, nonchalant. “Whaddya think, Levi? Did we make ourselves clear?”

"I thought so, but maybe 'e needs another shot." Levi lifted his arm again, and just as Nichols found a voice to protest, he dropped it. Another pop, the bullet blowing through a tire as Nichols shouted, "God Dammit!"

"So, Pastor?" Erwin asked, calm as the surface of a lake on a clear summer day, "Got somethin' for us?"

"L-...look, boys," Nichols started, panic rising in his voice, "Whatever it is you think you have found, I can assure you...*assure you* that I did not take part in it. I have nothing to do with these men."

"Nothin' at all?" Levi asked, tone pointedly skeptical. "You mean they just done gave you a big pretty altar fer yer shitty lil' church an' ya didn't do them a single fuckin' favor? It was jus' tha goodness of yer heart, is that it?"

"All I can say is that...I am not involved. I...I swear to you, I'm not... *not* involved." Nichol's eyes were wide, sweat beading his lip. "These are powerful men, bad men...I'm not one of them, Smith, I'm not."

"Look at me," Levi said, raising his arm again. "Right now, I'm havin' my man tear yer car ta pieces. But when I get tired'a doin' that? I'm gonna have 'im start puttin' holes in you instead, one limb at a time. An' if ya think he can't do it, lemme tell ya...I seen 'im shoot tha wings off a fly from a hun'nerd yards, so why don'cha jus' tell us what ya know an' avoid gratin' my ass further with yer screamin'?"

Nichols was breathing heavily, looking back and forth from Erwin to Levi as though expecting one of them to crack, to show him mercy. But it was clear from the ice in his eyes, the hard set of his jaw that Erwin had no more mercy for him than Levi. Nichols slumped against the door, shook his head. "They'll kill me...they'll kill me if I tell."

Levi shrugged. "If ya don't tell, I'll kill ya right here. So either get outta here an' hope we can stop 'im 'fore they find you, or take a bullet to tha brain after I use my considerable skill set ta make ya talk. Yer call. Far as I'm concerned, it's been too long since I watched a man writhe in agony after gettin' his balls ripped off with a pair'a pliers."

Nichols went white as a sheet. Levi dropped his arm, and three more bullets ripped through Nichols car before he screamed, "Stop! Stop, okay, a-...alright, alright! I'll...I'll tell you what I know."

"I knew you was a reasonable type," Erwin said, flashing a charming smile.

"I...I'm not involved in the...the business they have g-...going," Nichols shuddered, his eyes flipping between his car, Levi, and Erwin. "I just...I just take care of their finances. Filter them...through the church."

"An' ya take a nice cut, looks like."

"I am well...compensated." Nichols admitted with a nod. "But gentlemen...gentlemen! I must stress that I am *not involved* in their group."

“Spare us, Pastor,” Erwin said, “Yer directly contributin’ to it an’ yer livin’ offa their excesses, so I think we both know yer as culpable as they are. I think mah partner already told ya what ya’d be facin’ if ya don’t give us tha details we’re lookin’ for, so stop makin’ dumbass excuses an’ speak up.”

“All I know is that there is a man of...of some means who holds, well...*parties* for his peers. These parties are known, among a certain circle, as f...feasts. They take place somewhere well off the beaten path, and they involve every manner of debauchery...that can be arranged. In order to g...get in, a man must be able to pay the price, which as I understand, is around two thousand dollars a head. I...well, there are other systems used to vet the members, but I am not privy to them. Every few months, a package of cash would appear inside my house, and I was required to...l...launder it, and...and place it on the altar after the s...service ended on Wednesday. Wednesday nights. The next day it...it was gone.”

“Good, good,” Levi encouraged him. “An’ what’s the man’s name?”

“I don’t know,” Nichols started, but when Levi raised his hand, he stuttered, “N...no! No, he goes by Caesar, that’s all I know!”

“All you know?” Levi asked, his hand dipping slightly, making Nichols jump.

“Y...yes, yes, I swear it!”

Levi made a brief gesture with his finger and lowered his arm slowly before turning to Erwin. “Well, Smith, you believe ‘im?”

“Hmmm,” Erwin scratched his chin and looked at Nichols, whose gaze was switching between the two of them rapidly. “I ain’t sure, ta be honest.”

“Me either,” Levi said, shaking his head. “But he’s such a fuckin’ pussy. I bet it won’t take long ta get ‘im talkin’.”

“P...please, please don’t!” Nichols begged, tears welling up in his eyes, spilling out. In one swift motion, Levi had Nichols restrained, one arm pulled up behind his back, fingers extended.

“Alright, which finger ya think’ll hurt less, Nichols?”

“W...what?”

“When I break it, I mean.”

Nichols sobbed, and Erwin found himself biting back a smile. *Inappropriate*, he thought to himself. Still, it was hard not to be amused.

“C’mon, boy, answer tha fuckin’ question,” Levi growled, pushing Nichols arm until he cried out with pain.

“Please! Please! I don’t know anything else but I...I know where you can find what you’re looking for! Please! Please stop!”

Levi smirked up at Erwin then, his face so wicked and triumphant that it left Erwin reeling. He wanted to take him right there, however irrational, and the intensity of that impulse shocked him.

“Hmmm,” he said with exaggerated thoughtfulness. “Let’s hear it, an’ then we’ll decide if we’re lettin’ yer fingers stay unbroke.”

“Th-...the mayor, the mayor of Erath! He’s one’a the men that...that I know goes to these parties. He has a vault, something in his house, it’s got all the information that you need! Please!” He dissolved into sobs as Levi let him fall to the porch, limp.

“Tell us about this vault,” Levi said generously, “An’ we’ll think about lettin’ ya off tha hook.”

# A Sign of the Judgment

## Chapter Summary

“Smith,” Levi said, flicking a bit of ash away, his eyes fixing on Erwin’s. “Are ya sure you’re...ready fer this? Whatever’s in here...we ain’t gonna be able ta go back once we seen it. And sometimes...sometimes this shit sticks, and it don’t leave ya. It makes a mark on ya, and you never...you never scrub that shit off, ya know? I need ta be sure you’re...ready.”

## Chapter Notes

I'm going to put most of my notes at the end!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time Levi’s truck pulled up to the diner where they’d arranged to meet, Hange was already there, springing from their truck like some twisted jack-in-the-box.

Hange gave a triumphant yell as they tackled Levi into the side of his truck. “That was so much fun!! I hope yer plannin’ on lettin’ me join in yer fun an’ games more often!”

“No,” Levi frowned, pushing them away, but Erwin caught the spark of a smile in his eyes, even if it never reached his lips.

“Awww come on, spoil sport!” Hange said, making a gun with their hands. “Didya see tha way ‘is window shattered?”

“Hange, ya wanna tell tha whole damn world?” Levi growled, but Hange just laughed.

“Okay, fine, fine, Crash. You always was a buzzkill unless you was proper fucked-up. Who wants pancakes? My treat!”

They bounced in step next to Levi, who pulled a pained expression as he trudged toward the restaurant. Erwin couldn’t help his grin. There was something triumphant in this, and he found himself wishing that he could always work this way, without scruples or protocol. Levi’s addiction to the Narco life was far more understandable now that Erwin had gotten a taste of it himself.



But after they'd gotten seated and settled in the restaurant—Erwin on one side of the booth, Levi and Hange squeezed into the other—that feeling of jubilation began to ebb away. The information that Nichols had offered was useful, but it meant they had another dangerous mission to conquer. And though he'd been able to forget it for those brief moments, none of his personal turmoil was solved. He was still firmly entrenched in the strange purgatory between the life he'd always known and the promise he'd found in Levi's touch, still unsure of what bed he'd settle himself into at the end of all this. If, of course, they got out of this alive.

Hange was talking away, as always, but Erwin caught Levi's gaze settling on him, his brow lifting slightly. Erwin could see the question in his eyes, caught it for a split second before he looked away. Was he nervous? *Don't flatter yourself, Smith*. If he was nervous, Erwin was sure it didn't have anything to do with the situation between them. They had enough to be concerned with without worrying about that. It would have to wait. Jackie, though, would not, and Erwin feared that by the time this case was settled, Jackie's determination to leave him would be firmly entrenched.

*Jackie*. The need to speak with her, to hear her voice seized him with such intensity that he felt winded, aching. He couldn't let the day pass without calling. He wasn't sure that he was ready to lose her. Not yet.

"Ya'll know what yer orderin'?" The waitress drawled, flipping her order pad open. Hange ordered pancakes and coffee for each of them, and Erwin allowed it. He wasn't even sure that he felt like eating but, he sensed, it was going to be a long day and they needed their strength. Once she was gone, Levi pulled out his ever-present notebook and flipped open to a two-page spread already splashed with what appeared to be some kind of diagram.

"Alright," he said, "No more fuckin' around. We know this mayor has some incriminatin' evidence, but he ain't Caesar. I want Caesar. We're gonna have ta case tha mayor's house an' take it from there. I fig'ger we'll cut tha power an' pick tha lock, if'n we can. If not, we'll bust a window, but I don' want 'im knowing we was there unless there ain't no other choice. If Caesar don't already know we're onta him, I don' want 'im knowin'."

"An' who is Caesar?" Hange asked, a frown creasing their features. "Another politician? Religious type? I mean how deep does this thing go?"

"I dunno," Levi replied, frowning down at his notebook. "Could be any one'a those things, could be none of 'em. But we know he gots connections. Police, church, politics...he's gotta greasy finger in jus' about every pot in the Delta."

Hange gave a low whistle. "My my, Crash, what'd ya get yerself into? I'm half worried ta leave ya here."

"Only half?" Levi smirked. "You must be gettin' sick'a me."

Hange laughed softly, but even Erwin could tell that there was a lack of humor in their tone as they said, "Hope ya ain't plannin' on stickin' around this town. You ain't gonna have a pot ta piss in by tha time tha vultures finish with ya."

“The goal,” Levi said, eyes flicking up to meet Erwin’s, but only briefly, “Is ta get this done an’ get the hell outta dodge. If I can do that with all my vital parts intact, I’ll be in luck.

“And you?” Hange asked, turning to Erwin.

He opened his mouth to reply, but no sound left his throat. Just then the pancakes arrived, the waitress refilling everyone’s coffee and water and bringing warm little pitchers of maple syrup. In the commotion, no one seemed to notice when his voice found him again, when he muttered, “I ain’t got a fuckin’ clue.”

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After breakfast, Hange went on their way, promising that they would be back if it became necessary. Breaking into the mayor’s house would require some finesse, some special equipment, and the cover of darkness—they had hours to pass and a great deal to get done in the meantime. Levi smoked like a chimney, the silence between them even more jarring after the liveliness and chatter of Hange. Erwin opened his mouth to speak several times, but when he looked over at Levi, his scowl was so pronounced that Erwin took a cigarette from the ever-present pack and lit it up himself, cracked the window. He wasn’t sure how to confront the gulf between them. It felt as though it was widening, stretching into something that Erwin feared could become insurmountable, and though he held the cards in theory, he didn’t have a clue for how to play them. Ten aching minutes of silence later, he crushed his cigarette in the ashtray, unable to endure it any longer. There was one question that pressed at him harder than the others, and finally, he had to ask, “Did ya mean what ya said in there?”

“What’re ya talkin’ about?”

“About leavin’ after this case’s over?”

“Smith, I ain’t gonna have a choice. If...if ya don’t fuck things up fer yerself too bad, ya might have a chance, but if ya think I ain’t gonna get run outta town tha minute this shit is over then ya don’ know shit.”

This confirmation set a cold, quiet dread settling into the marrow of Erwin’s bones. He nodded back at Levi with a clenched jaw, not trusting himself to speak. He pulled out another cigarette and lit it up.

“There ain’t no guarantee we’re gonna make it that long though, so stop frettin’ an’ get yer shit together. We gotta plan this break-in or we sure as hell ain’t gonna make it through the night.”

Erwin swallowed his turmoil with a nod. “Wouldn’ it be better if we took a day ta case this place?”

“Yup. ‘cept if we do that, we’re givin’ Nichols a day ta tell ‘im we’re comin’.”

“We should’a killed that bastard.”

“Nah. They’d know exactly who done it an’ I’d never get outta jail. But I told ‘im he was gonna be watched by Hange ‘till we busted Caesar, so I don’t think ‘e’s gonna be makin’ no moves. It’s a risk though.”

“So we need ta case it tonight but be ready ta move just in case an opportunity presents itself.”

“I was thinkin’ tha same.”

Erwin had never broken into a house before. He was sure that Levi had, or at least he hoped so, but he was beginning to wonder how many times he’d broken the law since the beginning of this case. Was it still breaking the law, though, when the law was wrong? He’d heard of this kind of thing happening before on the force, cops going vigilante and meting out their own brand of “justice”, but Levi was different. Yes, he used the shield of his badge to operate with impunity in whatever way he saw fit, but if it came down to Pixis’ blind loyalty or Levi’s vigilantism, Erwin was sure he knew which one would solve the case. Maybe, sometimes, solving the case mattered more than the blackened souls of those who did the solving.

“This case is makin’ criminals outta us,” he muttered, raising a brow toward Levi. “Does it ever bother ya, straddlin’ tha line between bad guy an’ good guy?”

“I ain’t straddling no line,” Levi shrugged. “An’ I never claimed to be good. I made my peace with bein’ a bad man a long time ago. We’re just another part’a tha ecosystem’a this world. Just another part’a tha food chain. An’ sometimes, we’re the only thing that stands between the good people an’ the evil ones. Or at least that’s how I see it. Fer you...ya don’t haft do this, ya know, if ya don’t wanna get involved.”

“Don’cha think it’s a little bit late fer that?” Erwin asked, his tone testy. “I killed two men. I threatened a preacher. I don’t fig’ger it’s right ta kill fer somethin’ you ain’t ready ta die for.”

Impossibly, the barest hint of a smile pulled at Levi’s lips. It made Erwin weak.

“Lookit you, growin’ a sense’a conviction.”

Erwin wasn’t sure that was wholly accurate. He had conviction to spare for this case of theirs, but when it came to his own life...well. He was hit hard with a need to call Jackie, to hear her voice, to know the state of the life that had been pulled out from under him. Levi’s almost-smile took Erwin off guard, but it also reminded him of the choice he had to make. A choice he wasn’t sure that he *could* make. It kept hitting him like this; a punch to the gut, unexpected and searingly painful.

The life he’d made for himself was a good life. There was love there. Stability. Happiness, after a fashion. Not wanting that life had never occurred to him. Not having that life had never occurred to him, either, and now that all of his careful constructions were slipping through his fingers like so much sand, he didn’t know for the life of him whether to grasp at whatever pieces he could hold on to or to let it go. The trouble was, Levi wasn’t about to let himself be the life preserver. He’d made it clear that he wasn’t going to be Erwin’s anchor and Erwin knew it would be unfair to expect him to be. From what he could tell, Levi needed

his own stability, some exoskeleton that could hold his pieces together, keep him from spinning out or getting himself killed. And when Erwin considered that—Levi not as a stabilizing force but as a force he could stabilize—the need was almost overpowering. Instead of burying himself behind the intricate labyrinth of his own facade, he could let the Hurricane blow it all away. He could build himself back better, stronger. He could become the chassis that gave a frame to Levi's abandon.

"Stop gettin' all pensive. I need you ta help me plan this," Levi said.

All Erwin heard was *I need you*, and Levi had to clear his throat pointedly before Erwin registered the rest of the sentence.

"Uh...what'a we need ta break in?" he finally asked.

"Dark clothes. Lockpick kit. Low-light binoculars. I got all that shit from my Narco days, 'cept clothes that'll fit you. But I'm feelin' a little tetchy 'bout keepin' this shit at my house, 'specially whatever we find at tha mayor's place. We need ta rent some kinda storage unit."

"I can take care'a that."

"Fine. Ya do that an' I'll look up tha buildin' plans for 'is house. Should be public record'n all."

"What time'r we movin' on 'im?"

"We go after it gets nice'n dark, maybe ten?"

"Sounds about right."

Silence stretched between them again, uncomfortable in a way their silences rarely were. Finally, Levi said, "Smith, I know yer life is blowin' up right now, but you gotta focus. I need yer mind, I need ya on top'a yer game, not fightin' internal battles. Yer personal crisis is gonna have'ta wait."

Erwin lit another cigarette, set his jaw, and stared out the window.

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At the apartment, Levi loaded his most questionable possessions—unregistered guns, microphones, cameras, MC paraphernalia, five thousand dollars of cash in non-sequential bills, and a variety of other suspicious but dubiously legal items—into the trunk of Erwin's car. Erwin tried not to look at him, tried not to focus on the way his body moved, tried to feel ridiculous for being so enamored by the smallest things about him. It was a losing battle.

"Alright," Levi said, dusting off his hands after slamming the trunk shut. "Buy a contractor's light ta set on up in there, make sure ya get a unit with a workin' outlet. Meet me at Judy's at..." he checked his watch, frowned at it, "Three. That'll give ya four hours ta get it all set up an buy some dark clothes that ain't gonna make noise'r nothin'. Fair?"

"Yup," Erwin confirmed. "Three, Judy's."

“An’ *don’t* get distracted’r throw a pissfit about yer...circumstances. We ain’t got tha time.”

“I know, Levi.”

Levi frowned at him for a moment, assessing, then nodded. “Alright. Go on.”

Erwin made it five minutes down the road before he pulled over at a gas station and dug around his pockets for quarters. He dropped one into the phone, dialed a familiar number, and waited while it rang.

“Hello?”

“Jackie?” he asked, his voice splintering around the edges of her name. “It’s me.”

“I fig’ger I know yer voice, Erwin,” she shot back. She was annoyed, frustrated, tired...but also grieved. Erwin knew the cadence of her voice so well that he could read every mood. The familiarity of it struck him in a way it never had before. He’d never given it much thought. Nobody ever gave a second thought to the fixtures of their life until those fixtures were gone, a gaping hole in their wake.

“I miss you,” he said softly. Jackie snorted, sighed.

“You didn’ miss me before when you was gone overnight, did ya?”

“Jacks, that’s different. I knew I would come home ta you.”

“Jesus Christ, Erwin, I ain’t takin’ you back.”

“I ain’t askin’ ya too. I jus’...I wanna see my girls.”

“You gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me. Erwin, they don’ even bother askin’ after you anymore when ya’ain’t there fer dinner. Didya know that? Those girls’re jus’ used ta you bein’ gone, they’re used ta you not showin’ up...they gone days without seein’ you more times’n I can count. Hell, Erwin, I practically been a single mom fer the past year, especially, ya think this’s gonna be any different?”

“I’m sorry, Jackie, but that don’t change tha fact they’re gonna miss me. That don’t change the fact I miss you or them. I’m sorry I been absent an’ I know I gotta make it up ta you in a big way but I don’t...I don’t think it’s right jus’ ta...cut me off like that.”

“Right?” Jackie shot back, her voice raising. Erwin winced. Jackie was so even-tempered that she made everyone else seem mercurial by comparison. Erwin had only see her lose her temper a handful of times in the many years he’d known her, and never for anything less than a serious reason. Having her raise her voice at him, hearing it crack and tremble, the derisiveness of her tone cut clean through him.

“Right would’a been you tellin’ me you didn’ wanna fuck me before ya ever had a chance ta knock me up, Erwin. Right would’a been you bein’ honest, instead’a bein’ a fuckin’ snake an’ fuckin’ god knows how many men behind my back. Lemme guess...they was men, so you didn’ really fig’ger you was cheatin’? Is that how yer fool head rationalized this shit?”

“Jacks...” Erwin tried to cut in, desperately hoping no one was hearing her speak.

“No, Erwin. No. Just fuckin’ stop. Don’ you dare pull this shit with me. We’ll see about tha girls. but I worked hard ta teach them right, an’ I don’ want ‘em gettin’ confused because their daddy is a liar an’ a coward. So maybe yer gonna hav’ta show me you can handle bein’ a father ‘fore I think about lettin’ ya near my girls.”

“*Our* girls,” Erwin muttered.

“Yeah well I got news fer you, ya don’ just get ta be a father when its convenient fer you jus’ because ya made a baby with somebody, Erwin. It’s a fuckin’ privilege an’ it’s about damn time you started actin’ like it.”

“I’m a good father,” he started, but the words were already turning to sawdust in his mouth, choking him.

“Yeah, ya sure are, on those rare occasions when ya actually bother ta show up.”

“How am I s’posed ta prove myself if ya ain’t givin’ me a chance, Jackie?”

“Figure. It. Out.” Jackie emphasized each word. “An’ take yer fuckin time because I don’ wanna see you again for a long damn time.”

Her voice broke over the last syllables. She was crying, and Erwin felt the tears stinging at his own eyes. He leaned over the phone, desperately hoping no one could see him.

“Jacks,” his voice so soft that it was practically a whisper. “I don’ wanna lose my whole life.”

Jackie was sniffing now, the sound of it stabbing into him. “Honey,” she spoke around her tears, her voice impossibly steady, “It ain’t a life yer losin’...it’s just a lie. I never agreed ta be a part’a that. Where ya go from here, what ya do...that’s yer call. All I know is I ain’t gonna have nothin’ ta do with it. I....I jus’ can’t.”

There was a click and she was gone. Erwin stood there, receiver pressed to his ear, long after the mechanical tone reverberated through him.

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Levi stirred an unseemly amount of sugar into his coffee, watching as the crystals disappeared, dissolved.

The clock on the wall read five minutes past three, and Levi wondered to himself whether or not Erwin was going to show up. Given the state he was in, given what had happened, Levi wasn’t sure that Erwin could be counted on, and furthermore, that he *wanted* to count on Erwin. He’d never wanted to hurt Jackie, yet here they were. Even now, he wondered if it would be better for all of them for him to disappear. Jackie might not take Erwin back, and even if that was for the best, Levi wasn’t convinced that *he* was for the best, either. He’d long since given up caring about his own well being, but if Erwin chose to pursue him over his own family, they would be more or less acknowledging a commitment that Levi wasn’t sure he cared to make.

He didn't want to give a damn about Erwin Smith. He just wanted to find this Caesar, end him, and leave this place forever. He'd been in the process of outrunning his own despair since Izzy and Farlan died. He couldn't expect Erwin to shelter him from the storm of himself, not when Erwin had a storm of his own. When he was young, an old farmer told him that some tornados spun out on their own, lacking the warm and cold mix that fueled them. But when a "real bad twister" came along, the only thing that could dissipate it was running headlong into another storm system.

He had no way to know if Erwin was the storm he needed. He couldn't seem to push him away, though, not hard enough to get through that thick head of his. Erwin was the type who set his sites on something, then obtained it, in that order, always. He was magnetic. Irresistible. Levi felt helplessly pulled into the field of Erwin's gravity, all cold rationale and logic aside. So let Erwin choose. Let Erwin decide. Maybe he was an idiot, but Levi figured if Erwin wanted to throw his life away, it wasn't his place to stop him.

Of course, he wasn't about to encourage him, either, and so he'd made sure that Erwin had a chance. A chance to run, a chance to go back to his wife, a chance to think about what it really meant to leave all of this behind. Whatever Erwin did, Levi hoped, at least, he would do it with conviction. That would simplify things. Perhaps—just perhaps—if Erwin acted with enough conviction, Levi could allow himself to trust that judgement.

Perhaps Erwin wouldn't even show up to this meeting, and Levi would be left to solve the rest of this case on his own. That would be okay, he reasoned, except that all of his tools and cash were now in a storage unit somewhere and he didn't have the key. Erwin wouldn't fuck him over like that, though. Whatever happened, he was sure that he would be able to get back to his things. Levi decided to give him an hour; if he hadn't shown up by four, Levi would track him down, get the keys to the storage unit, and never bother him again. He sipped his coffee and, knowing there was nothing to be done but wait, let himself zone out to the world around him.

Erwin walked in at half past three. Though he looked tired and uncharacteristically drawn, and though Levi would never have admitted it, the sense of relief that flowed through his veins was almost overwhelming.

"Take the scenic route?" he asked, snide and sipping at his coffee.

"Sorry 'bout that," Erwin shrugged. "None'a tha shoes I could find didn' squeak, so I had ta make do."

Levi rolled his eyes and lit a cigarette as Erwin slid into the booth opposite him.

"I said I was sorry, Jesus. Get yer panties outta that wad an' tell me what ya found."

Through a stream of smoke, Levi said, "There's a safe in 'is study. We ain't gonna get it open with a lockpickin' kit, so either we...convince him ta tell us that combination, or we sit there with a stethoscope an' try'n open it up."

"Can ya do that?"

“I know tha principles, but I ain’t never cracked a safe before...I only been standin’ there when one was cracked.”

“So what’re tha chances you can do it?”

“Sixty-forty?”

“Guess that ain’t bad...” Erwin muttered, stroking the stubble on his face. “Can we fig’ger out tha make’a tha safe? Maybe get some insight on crackin’ it?”

“We could, if’n we had more time. As it is, I say we try’n crack it, an’ if it ain’t gonna crack, we drag tha mayor in with a gun to ‘is head an see if he can’t remember the combination.”

“Sounds about right.”

Levi sipped at his coffee as Erwin waived a waitress over and gave her his order. By the time the food arrived, Levi couldn’t help himself anymore. “How’s Jackie?” he asked casually.

“How the fuck would I know.”

“I ain’t stupid, Smith.” Levi shrugged.

Erwin paused, chewing, then wiped his mouth with a napkin and sat back, looking Levi up and down. “Ya really wanna know?”

Levi wasn’t sure. There was a part of him that did, certainly, and another part that absolutely did not. Some rational part of him knew, however, that Erwin was distracted, and that such distractions could become dangerous to them in the wrong circumstances. “I need ya to be on yer top game,” Levi finally replied. “So if ya gotta get it off’a yer chest, I’ll listen.”

Erwin looked straight into his eyes and Levi almost shivered under that gaze, though he refused to look away. Finally, Erwin shook his head. “No,” he said, “I can deal with it myself.”

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“Lemme see those,” Levi whispered, reaching over to pluck his binoculars from Erwin’s grasp.

“I’m tellin’ you, he ain’t here.”

“Yeah, thanks, fer the hundredth time. I’m tryin’a see if ‘e’s got a dog’r somethin’.”

“Well, I ain’t seen nothin’.”

“There.”

“What? You did not jus’ see a fuckin’ dog...”

“Nope, jus’ a circuit box.”



“Well, god damn.”

The mayor’s house was an ostentatious Colonial monstrosity, outfitted, judging by the signs in the yard, with a modern new security system and god knew what else. It was typically arrogant, Levi thought, that these assholes would have a security system with an outdoor circuit box. Such a security system was, more than anything, an advertisement to all who may visit the estate that things here were valuable. Good. Worth stealing.

“Elegant, ain’t it?” Levi muttered, “All this, an’ the emperor still ain’t got no clothes.”

Erwin snorted. “Here’s hopin’ they’re all naked by the end of this.”

“Might be a little ambitious,” Levi muttered, binoculars fixed to his eyes. “But if we find somethin’ good here, at least it’ll give us a bargainin’ chip, which I gotta feelin’ we’re gonna need. Alright, I’m gonna go take out the power. You keep an’ eye out. When ya see me signal, come on up.”

“Yep,” Erwin confirmed. Levi slipped from the truck and melted seamlessly into the night, so lithe and small and quick that Erwin was sure that, without the night-vision function of the binoculars, he wouldn’t have been able to see him at all. There were a few lights on in the mansion and outside of it, lights that had caused them to spend well over an hour staring through binoculars and bickering about whether or not to attempt their break-in now. Though the possibility of a dog was a concern, they both knew that it would be better to make an attempt now, while the mayor was clearly away. They couldn’t be sure that they would get another chance like this, and with every minute that passed, the possibility of losing their element of surprise diminished. It was move now, or take a far greater risk with moving later.

The lights flickered off, and Erwin sucked in a breath before slipping out of the truck. He tried to clear his mind, tried to push aside the whirlwind of thought and emotion that had threatened to overtake him all day long and just *focus*. Nothing mattered in this moment except getting in the house, cracking the safe, and getting out.

By the time he made it to the porch, the front door was already hanging open. He slipped inside, closed the door after him, and tried to picture the floor plans of the house. On the quietest feet he could manage, he made his way down the hall, to the right, down another hall, up a set of stairs and to the left, and finally, through a large oaken door and into the study that held the vault. As he’d predicted, Levi was already there.

“What took ya so long,” Levi whispered, pulling a stethoscope out of his bag with leather-gloved hands. “Had ta dry tha piss off yer pants?”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, smartass,” Erwin tossed back with a smile as he moved toward the file cabinet next to the desk.

“Do me a favor an try ta be as quiet as ya can.”

“Will do.”

He more or less figured that the unlocked drawers wouldn't contain anything of interest, but he looked through them quickly anyway, using a penlight to give a bit of illumination. Levi had showed him how to pick locks earlier that afternoon, and he used this newly acquired skill to open the locked drawer at the bottom of the file cabinet. He paged through the tax records and investment documents there, but still, nothing particularly interesting stood out. His eyes drifted over to Levi, who was turning the dial of the safe very slowly and methodically with one hand, the other holding the diaphragm of the stethoscope up to the door. Though Erwin planned to look through all of the drawers and files, he was fairly certain that the mayor would not be so arrogant as to keep the evidence here. Whatever there was to connect him to these parties, it had to be in the safe.

"Bingo," Levi said, turning the safe's handle and swinging it open. "Done."

"Jesus, you're incredible," Erwin whispered. "Let's see what we got here."

Levi shined his penlight into the safe, letting the beam travel over the contents before he reached inside and pulled them out. There were several envelopes, one containing a solid rectangle that felt like a videotape. At the back, there was a small handgun and two boxes of bullets. Levi put all of it in the pack he'd brought, shined his light one last time in the now-empty safe, and then shut the door.

"We can look at it in tha storage unit," Levi whispered, "I don' wanna stay here a minute longer'n I have to."

"Agreed," Erwin nodded.

"Ya find anythin' in those drawers? We ain't gonna get another chance ta do this, ya know,"

"Jus' the usual tax records an' shit. It'll be better ta let it be subpoenaed than ta try'n'a fig'ger what's damning and what ain't tonight."

"Agreed. Let's get outta here."

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"Wanna stop fer some beers?" Erwin asked as Levi drove, the both of them buzzing already with excitement.

"Nah, coffee'd be better, it's gonna be a long night. We are gonna hafta fig'ger out how ta watch that video, though."

"God damnit, how come ya ain't never bought a television, Levi?"

"Never needed one. I ain't interested in what tha television has fer me."

"Yeah well, that aside, we sure could use one now, an' it ain't like...well. Usin' mine ain't an option."

"Isn't tha old K-Mart open late?"

“Not this late.”

“An’ I don’t fig’ger any a yer buddies from the Department’d be able ta help us an’ be trusted not ta squeal?”

“Even if they weren’t gonna squeal, it ain’t fair ta involve anyone else.”

“True.”

They rode in silence for a moment, each contemplating those who could ostensibly be called upon for a television and VCR at one in the morning.

“Wait, what about that bartender?” Erwin asked. “The one at Pats?”

“Jerry?”

“Yeah, that’s tha one. You suppose ‘e’d let us borrow ‘is TV/VCR combo ’til tomorrow? Tha one ‘e keeps in tha back?”

“I imagine ‘e would if we paid ‘im.”

Half an hour and a hundred dollar bill later, they had their TV/VCR combo, no questions asked. Jerry had been more than happy to lend it to them with that compensation, even told them they could keep it for a few days if they needed to. At least, Erwin thought, they still had a few friends who could be bought in this town.

At the storage unit, they set up the contractor’s light, the television, and a card table that Erwin had bought on a whim. With the door cracked to ventilate Levi’s near-constant cloud of cigarette smoke, they opened Levi’s pack and pulled out the flattest envelope.

“Smith,” Levi said, flicking a bit of ash away, his eyes fixing on Erwin’s. “Are ya sure you’re...ready fer this? Whatever’s in here...we ain’t gonna be able ta go back once we seen it. And sometimes...sometimes this shit sticks, and it don’t leave ya. It makes a mark on ya, and you never...you never scrub that shit off, ya know? I need ta be sure you’re...ready.”

Erwin took a deep breath and pushed it out, nodded, his lips pushed into a thin line. “I need ta know, same as you. I need ta know what happened ta Ibis, ta Gabriel. I need ta know what this Caesar guy’s done...I think we both do. I dunno how we’re gonna take ‘im out if we don’t. Know thy enemy an’ all that.”

“That, an’ ya need ta know before ya put a bullet in ‘im.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Alright.” Levi swallowed roughly, stomach turning, throat sticking. A heaviness had settled over them, a leaden blanket of dread, of anticipation. Slowly, Levi unwound the string that held the first envelope together, and with still-gloved, shaking fingers, pulled out the contents. It was a stack of at least twenty invitations, written in what was clearly meant to be some kind of Greco-Roman style, each with gold and purple embossed lettering. The

invitations were addressed to “Senator Amicitia,” and each one spoke of debauchery of the finest nature, every carnal pleasure a man could desire.

“Ya know,” Levi said, “These assholes never change. They been usin’ this damn Papyrus font Greco-Roman motif ta class-up their bullshit fer centuries. I can’t believe anybody still falls fer this shit.”

“Anythin’ ta feed their egos, right? I mean, ain’t that what this’ ‘bout?”

“I ain’t sure,” Levi frowned. “Yer guess’ as good as mine.”

“Well, guess there’s only one way ta find out,” Erwin muttered as he reached for the second, slightly thicker envelope, and unwound the string. Levi stacked the invitations and put them back in their envelope and lit a fresh cigarette. They were ready or, at least, as ready as they would ever be.

Though it was mostly filled with papers, the second envelope held something that the first had not: pictures. Levi began looking at them immediately, eyes slowly widening. There was Ibis, perhaps only twelve years old, wrapped in a white toga, a crown of ivy on her snow-white head, a bow slung over her shoulder. Even then, she had some blisters round her mouth, even then, her eyes were wide and blank and horrible, but it was her hands that caught Levi’s eye most of all.

“That’s a clay man,” he muttered, “She’s holdin’ a clay man.”

Erwin plucked the picture from Levi’s hands and held it closer to the light, frowning at it thoughtfully. “Are ya sure? I ain’t sure that’s...I mean it’s just a grainy lil’ brown blob.”

“Yeah, but look at tha shape’a tha head.”

“What does it mean?”

“I ain’t sure, but I’m pretty fuckin’ sure it’s important.”

The next picture was of a younger Gabriel, a small, vacant smile on his face as he sat naked and crowned in ivy on a stool in the middle of a mostly-dark room, one warm light shining down on him. Spread out behind him were two large, feathered white wings. There was some shadowy form around his hand, but even Levi couldn’t tell if it was a clay man or not.

“They gotta have some kinda significance, ya know? There’s gotta be some...oh my god.”

“What?” Erwin asked, distracted by a list of words and phrases written on a yellowing piece of paper in a swooping, meticulous hand.

“Lottie. It’s Lottie Jenkins.”

Levi handed the picture to Erwin, who scrutinized it carefully. The photo had been taken from above what appeared to be a recessed oval...not quite a pit, but perhaps about five feet deep. Lottie was in the pit, naked, long hair pulled up atop her head. Her body was shiny, dripping with something...oil, perhaps? And there was another person in with her, a pale

little body, slicked down just the same, with bleached-white hair. Lottie appeared to be laughing. Erwin frowned. "Can ya tell if that's Ibis?"

"Nah...could be another one, though.

"True, true," Erwin grunted, his stomach turning. The implication of those photos was a truth too horrifying to truly consider. It loomed large over them, taking a terrifying shape. It had been obvious that, whatever truth lay behind Ibis, Gabriel, and Caesar, it was beyond what Erwin might have previously considered the human capacity for evil. His list of words and phrases seemed innocuous by comparison, though truly, nothing touched by this horror could remain untainted. Not even the hopeless fools who investigated it. "Whaddya suppose these are?" He asked, handing Levi the list.

"Maybe each party has an access phrase, ya know? Some kinda secret password ta get in tha door? I mean, that seems like jus' tha kinda cryptic bullshit that'd tickle ol' Caesar."

"I think yer right."

They sifted through the rest of the papers, their brittle, yellowed faces giving less away by the second. Levi had the distinct impression that the papers were deliberately frustrating them, holding tantalizing nuggets of information, yet nothing substantial, nothing useful. Had he been a more superstitious man he might have wondered if the papers themselves were cursed, made to thwart whoever attempted to know them. No, they were just papers, imbued with no power, perhaps only compiled by a man who understood the rigors of evidence and what sorts of things would (or would not) hold up in court.

But...they still had the videotape.

Levi turned and took out that final envelope, aware of Erwin's gaze and the deliberate way it avoided him. He unwound the string, opened the tab, and slid his gloved hand inside. There was a tape, and nothing more, so he removed it slowly, almost reverently. It was black, unlabeled, and needed to be rewound. Levi swallowed thickly, the heaviness of whatever that tape contained settling deep into his bones, making it hard to move, to think, to breathe. His mouth was desert-dry, but he took another drag anyway. It brought him no relief.

"Are ya...are ya ready fer this?" Erwin asked, his voice soft, hesitant.

"I reckon I better be. Are you?"

"Don't see as we got any kinda choice, really."

Levi slid the tape into the VCR and hit rewind. As the VCR whirled to life, Erwin reached over and slid one of Levi's cigarettes out of his pack. The tape clicked, fully rewound. All that was left was to press play.

For a moment, they sat there, each waiting for the other to move. Finally, Erwin sighed, lit his cigarette, and pressed play. They weren't ever going to be ready for this, so there was only one option left. The blue light of the screen flickered through the cloud of their smoke and, after a moment of snow, the film began.

## Chapter End Notes

Okay! First I would like to say that, while I am working very hard to write as often as possible, I can not be sure that I will be able to release a chapter next Wednesday. I've removed the "Updates every Wednesday" from the fic description, but IF I can swing it, I will try to update no less than every other week. There are only three chapters left!! So I will try to finish those chapters as quickly as I can. I do not want to sacrifice quality, however. So I promise, **promise** that I will finish this fic, please don't worry about it being abandoned before you find all the answers you've been waiting for!! It just might take longer to get there.

Second, I did readings of two parts of Irascible! For anyone interested in what the accents sound like, [go here](#). And this is the [other one](#), which is from the last chapter. I'm sorry, I'm not a voice actor, but I hope you enjoy them all the same.

Also there was a lot of fan art!!! My sweet commanderbolo made [this gorgeous picture](#) of Erwin and Levi, BUT ALSO MADE [THIS ONE](#) OF IBIS AND GABRIEL MSDKSJDKS. I love it when people draw my OCs so I was super excited!!!! Sweetlittlevampire drew a really gorgeous Levi [here](#), and thewiselittleowl [drew a lovely Levi](#) as well! Wow, thank you so much, everyone!!! Haha here's hoping all those links work.

I think that's everything. I promise the next chapter will be released asap. You can always watch my tumblr for more information! I will post progress reports. :)

Now please feel free to scream at me about my mean evil cliffhanger endings. :3

# Verity

## Chapter Summary

It was okay, Erwin reasoned, to need comfort. It was okay to turn to one another. All else aside, they couldn't know if they would come back from this, and even if they did, the horror of the evidence they'd found was devastating. Erwin knew there was a part of him that needed to be reminded that there was good in the world, there were still things worth fighting for. Whatever happened to them, it would be in service of the goodness he still saw hidden in the corners, despite the shadows that threatened to overwhelm it.

## Chapter Notes

\*\*\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\*\*\*: The first segment of this chapter contains talk of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, most of which is perpetrated against children. It's not very graphic, but please, take care of yourself.

Notes at the end!

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The camera started out shaky, unfocused, the whole screen black and white, with the greenish hue of old home movies. Several seconds of fumbling led to a clearer picture, a light shined on a long table of men, each wearing a mask and crowned in ivy; there were goblets, grapes, a whole roasted pig with an apple stuffed in its mouth, turkey legs, bread before them. The men pushed food up beneath their masks, talked, laughed, but the details were fuzzy, impossible to distinguish. One man in the middle stood out, his robes red instead of white, a crown upon his head that might have been gold. On his lap, pressed against him, was a small white haired child, draped in snowy white robes.

The film cut, switching to an up-close shot of a girl that could have been Ibis, tongue out, a tab of Pinwheel dissolving on it.

“Did you get a clay man this evening, Ibis?” a man’s voice asked. The little girl nodded, then held up five slender fingers.

“Five? Five clay men?” the voice asked. The little girl nodded again, pulling her tongue in.

“I see they’ve given you the mana, the ambrosia of the gods, Ibis. Their hooks are buried deep in your bones.”

The little girl’s eyes widened slightly, and she swayed on her feet.

“C’mon, little songbird,” the voice said, and the scene cut.

The screen was black for a moment before it cut to a new scene, a small white-haired child they hadn’t seen before standing in the pit from the pictures. A girl of at least sixteen, emaciated and shaking, stood on the opposite side. The child held a long, wicked hunting knife.

“Come Janus,” a voice called out from the crowd. “End her.”

The child was breathing heavily as the shouts of the men became louder and louder, little shoulders heaving up and down as the girl in the pit stared with faraway eyes. Erwin felt like he might be sick, felt like he needed to reach into the television screen to stop this horror, this madness, but there was nothing to be done...nothing to be done but to watch helplessly. What happened next happened all at once, the men yelling and jeering, the child moving lightening fast on little feet, running across the expanse of the pit with an animal scream, burying the knife deep in the chest of the girl, who seemed too shocked to cry out.

The crowd went silent. The girl coughed, blood dribbling out of her mouth. The child threw their head back and laughed. The film cut.

It was black for only a moment before the scene opened again on Ibis, stretched out on a bed, naked, her hands bound above her head. Next to her, lined up in a neat row, were five clay men. “You’re a popular girl,” a voice said. “Sweet little songbird.”

The film cut, and Gabriel was strung up by his arms, naked, white wings spread out behind him.

Another cut, and there was the child called Janus, a woman washing the blood off his skin. “What a warrior you are,” the voice murmured, a hand coming out to stroke his cheek. Janus’ eyes were wide, pupils blown, and he nodded, a slow, strange smile spreading over his features.

“I’m a good boy,” he muttered softly. “The beginning and the end.”

“You sing in harmony,” the voice said, an affirmation. “Perhaps you will sing with the other songbirds tonight.”

“As the gods wish.”

What followed was a montage of horror: five men surrounded Ibis, still stretched and bound to the bed, spread eagle, her urgent laughter the only sound that filled the room. Hands running up Gabriel’s sides, two girls working the cock of some faceless man, Janus spread out on a St. Andrews cross, arms and legs stretched and tied. Erwin felt his stomach roiling,



his eyes burning, but he forced himself to watch, forced himself not to look away. He had to know. Levi's hand gripped the edges of his chair until his joints began to lock up, an elemental cry trapped deep in his throat.

Finally, it was over, snow filling the screen. Erwin got up, ran to the door, and barely made it out ten feet before he was retching, emptying the contents of his stomach onto the gravel lot of the storage complex. When he was done, he spat, cleared his throat, spat again, and walked back into the unit. Levi sat frozen, knuckles white from gripping at the chair.

Erwin dug around until he found a bottle of whiskey, unscrewed the cap and slugged down three gulps without stopping for breath. He needed it, needed something, needed revenge but this would have to do for now. He pressed the bottle into Levi's chest but Levi pushed it away almost violently.

"No," he said, his voice rough. "Not 'til 'e's dead."

"Yeah," Erwin nodded. "Fuck prison. A mad dog's gotta be put down."

"I don' care if it kills me." Levi whispered, eyes bloodshot and wide. "I will end him."

Erwin nodded. "Ya ain't gonna do it alone."

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After the video, all else faded into whispers; both their focus became a singular thing. The horror of what they had seen was so complete that it offered a new and unexpected perspective. The swirling questions and personal dramas faded away; they had been galvanized. For Erwin, whatever happened after this was immaterial. All that mattered now was finding Caesar, ending Caesar. The idea that his life may not extend past that goal was real to him in a way it never had been before, but he felt at peace with that. He would give his life — he would give many lives — if it meant slaying the beast.

Levi turned off the TV and began furiously organizing the pictures, the papers, all the information that they had. His mind was a hurricane, but he knew that power could be harnessed. "We need to find him," he said firmly, his voice strangely even.

"I know tha mayor, ya know, an' that voice ain't his."

"Ya know who it is?"

"Nah, but there's only a handful'a people ta look at. We're talkin' somebody with a big place, somebody w'money...an' tha's only...maybe ten'r so people in Erath, if that."

"So we look at tha buildin' permits, public record shit..."

"I reckon we'll find 'im pretty quick."

"Well, that'll have ta wait fer tomorra'."

"How quick ya think we can move on this?"

“Depends. I’m thinkin’ tomorra’ night, maybe? We gotta make sure, no matter what, no matter *what* happens ta us, this evidence can’t get buried.”

“How’re we gonna do that? At this point I ain’t sure who we can trust in tha force, an’ I ain’t willin’ ta put anybody in danger, either.”

“Hange.”

“They’re a civillian.”

Levi snorted. “Oh yeah? Hange’s an’ outlaw an’ they can handle themself. Plus, their tha only person I know can call a cadre of MC folks as a personal guard if’n they feel tha need. Don’ underestimate ‘em.”

“I s’pose yer right,” Erwin tentatively agreed.

“We need ta make evidence packets. Copy the tape. Make sure they get sent out ta every level’a tha government, the force. Even tha FBI, ‘specially if we don’t come back from this. Hange can do this. They can even call in the force as an anonymous civilian if we need ‘em to.”

“Alright, okay. We call Hange an’ we make evidence packets. What else?”

“Janus.”

“Ya think ‘e’s still with Caesar?”

“Yeah, an’ I think ‘e’s more dangerous’n Ibis’r Gabriel, maybe both combined.”

“I dunno, Ibis didn’ hesitate ta put a knife in ya when she had a chance...”

“Yeah, an’ I fig’ger she got put in that pit plenty’a times ‘erself. But Caesar cut tha others loose when’e started tryin’a build a new flock with Andrew Gutierrez. So why didn’ ‘e cut Janus loose? An’ if ‘e did, how come we ain’t seein’ any new bodies? An’ what if ‘e was successful kidnappin’ a new kid that we ain’t heard about yet? We ain’t got no answers an’ I fig’ger we need ta be cognizant’a that...there’s a lotta shit we ain’t gonna know ’til we get there.”

“So we need a plan.”

“Yeah, but even with a plan...”

“It ain’t gonna be smooth.”

“Nah. ‘cause even tha best plan can’t account fer everythin’, an’ since we can’t bring in the law, it’s jus’ gonna be the two’a us against...well, hopefully jus’ Caesar an’ Janus, but there ain’t no tellin’.”

Levi bustled around and left Erwin to his thoughts. A part of him knew that they were hardly ready, that they were likely to be outnumbered and in an unfamiliar setting. Caesar’s capacity

for inhumanity was unmatched, unlike anything Erwin had ever seen, and if they were going to confront him in the halls of his own Olympus, no plan in the world could truly account for the horrors they might be forced to confront.

“Levi, I don’t know if ya got any affairs ta get in order, but I’m gonna need ta visit my lawyer tomorrow ‘fore we do this.”

“Everythin’ I got goes ta Hange, fer whatever that’s worth, settled that awhile ago,” Levi shrugged. “I don’...have any complexities. Not anymore.”

Erwin remembered something that Hange had said, a comment that had seemed to bear greater significance than its off-hand presentation might suggest. He looked over at Levi, who stopped organizing papers for a moment and stared back at him.

“What?”

“Levi...if we make it through this...will ya tell me about Izzy an’ Farlan?”

Levi sighed. “If...if ya stick aroun’, then maybe I’ll tell ya. When I’m good’n ready.”

“I can live wi’ that.”

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They spent most of the night sifting through every detail of the papers, trying to glean every possible detail that they could. Erwin dug a county map out of his car and pinned it up, mapping out exactly where they’d found bodies and killers. Erath and the area around it was clearly the hotbed of activity, and though the area looked small, Erwin knew that it represented thousands of acres of delta land. They were going to have to narrow it down, but that could be done easily tomorrow. Around three a.m., he figured that they had done all they could do.

“Levi,” he murmured softly, hoping not to startle him. He’d been sitting and staring intently at the photo of Gabriel for at least ten minutes, eyes bloodshot and wide. Erwin assumed he was trying to ascertain whether or not the boy had a clay man, but staring at a grainy photo wasn’t going to offer any new information. Levi didn’t respond, so Erwin laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He wasn’t expecting Levi to lean back into his arm, but when he did, Erwin pressed a little closer. Despite his thorny exterior, despite his stormy eyes and quiet violence, even Levi didn’t care to walk into hell alone. Erwin leaned down over him and asked, “Did you hear me?”

“Hmm? No...what’d’ya say?”

“Jus’ yer name...but I was gonna ask ya...maybe we should try’n get some sleep. Ya know...before all this starts. We need ta get everythin’ copied tomorra’ an’ lookit them building permits an’ tha like...we can’t do any of it fer about six hours, an’ we can’t go into this...into Caesar’s place without bein’ on top’a our game.”

Levi sighed, set Gabriel's picture on the table, and rubbed at his eyes. "Yeah. I reckon yer right. Let's go."

They drove separate cars back to Levi's apartment, took separate routes, too paranoid to leave either of their vehicles at the storage unit or travel together. The last thing they needed was someone spotting them there, and at this point, the wrong person becoming privy to their hiding spot could spell disaster. If they lost any of that evidence, it would be devastating. Erwin was tempted to bring it with him, but it was more likely that he would be pulled over and searched than that anyone would find their unit. Maybe it was just the sleep deprivation, the mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion, but he was beginning to obsess about the measures Pixis and the higher-ups might be willing to take to stop him...*them*. There was no way to know if they were being watched or, if so, how closely. At least nobody knew to keep an eye on Hange—he would feel better when the copies of the evidence sat with them.

He pulled into Levi's driveway, parked, and made his way up the porch. Clearly, he wasn't the only one suffering the effects of paranoia; Levi answered the door with a cigarette in one hand and a gun in the other, finger poised on the safety. Neither of them were in much of a talking mood, each going about their routines in relative silence with the exception of Levi's phone call to Hange, during which he barely grunted more than ten words. They would arrive tomorrow, late morning, and that was that.

It wasn't until Erwin began to head toward the upstairs bedroom that Levi placed one hesitant hand on his arm, opened his mouth to speak. Erwin looked at him, brows slightly raised, and Levi pulled his hand away, frowned.

"Was there somethin' you...wanted ta say?" Erwin asked, trying to make his tone as neutral as possible.

"Jus'...wanted ta let ya know that...well. I jus'. Wouldn' mind if ya wanted ta share mah bed tonight. Fig'ger it ain't too comfortable ta sleep on tha floor two nights in a row."

Erwin didn't want to smile, didn't want to scare Levi off. He recognized the vulnerability of the statement—no, invitation—and didn't want it to evaporate. So he nodded and simply said, "I'll grab mah blanket."

It was okay, Erwin reasoned, to need comfort. It was okay to turn to one another. All else aside, they couldn't know if they would come back from this, and even if they did, the horror of the evidence they'd found was devastating. Erwin knew there was a part of him that needed to be reminded that there was good in the world, there were still things worth fighting for. Whatever happened to them, it would be in service of the goodness he still saw hidden in the corners, despite the shadows that threatened to overwhelm it.

He spread the blanket over the mattress before slipping underneath it. Levi's hands were strangely cold when they slid over his arms and around his back, pulled him closer.

"Yer freezin'," Erwin whispered, wrapping his arms around Levi's hard, lean form, fitting their bodies together.

Levi pressed his cold nose into Erwin's chest, whispered, "Jus'...jus' shut up an' hold me."

For a time, he did, running his hands over the skin of Levi's back, through his hair, marveling at how good it felt to touch him again after the chasm that had settled between them since... had it really only been last night? Time felt like it was turning into taffy, stretching and sliding without regard for the two of them or anyone else. But why should time speed or slow for two sad sinners like them? It might have been a day, but it felt like a month, a year, a lifetime. Erwin had lived and died and risen anew in those twenty-four hours. To say that last night had been a mere day ago was to stretch the constraints of a day to dizzying, unbelievable proportions. He pressed his face into Levi's hair, breathed him in. Levi pushed in closer, as if he could disappear into Erwin, be swallowed up by him if only he pushed hard enough.

Erwin pressed his lips to Levi's scalp, to his temple, his forehead. Levi's nails dug into his back, his sides, his breath shuddering. Erwin understood then that it was too much to bear, or too much to bear alone, anyway. They needed one another now, and whatever would become of them tomorrow...that was for tomorrow. Today, tonight, in this bed, it could be the two of them and nothing more. They could press themselves together and find whatever comfort the other held. There didn't need to be any deeper meaning.

It was different this time. Slower. Gentler. The raw, animal violence of their first time had been replaced by a something that wasn't quite gentle, something that reached beyond its own boundaries, something devastatingly human. Erwin's lips found Levi's first, then his neck, his ears, his chest shuddering, his heart beating wildly. With a moan, Levi was rolling atop him, pushing him down, frothing against him, and even this felt incredible. He was all lithe muscle, and Erwin reveled in the hardness of him, in the heat between his legs as they moved together, panting and sweating.

Levi bucked against him, hands pressed into his chest, groaning as Erwin moved his hips. Neither of them spoke, not even to curse or moan the other's name; there was nothing between them but pants and moans and a desperate affirmation of what neither of them was prepared to say aloud.

Levi came first, his body going rigid, teeth biting at his lower lip, head thrown back. The sight of it sent Erwin over the edge, and his could feel his own hot come spurting onto his stomach as Levi shuddered and shook against him.

Exhausted, spent, Erwin wiped himself clean with a handful of tissues before rolling over on his side and pulling Levi back against him. They slept that way, fitted together like pieces of a puzzle, until morning.

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Armed with coffee, they made their first stop of the morning at the Vermilion Parish Clerk of Court. Even without their badges, the records that they needed weren't difficult to access. Unfortunately, they weren't easy to peruse, either. They couldn't know for sure that Caesar lived in Erath city limits, in fact, it was more likely that he did not, considering the need for privacy that his parties had to require. But that left thousands of records, records that were organized not by household size or by income of the inhabitant, but rather by the date of the application.

“We can assume ‘e overhauled ‘is house at least once, maybe ‘round tha time Matilda MaCarty went missin’,” Levi muttered, neither of them wishing to be overheard by the clerk. She seemed more curious than suspicious, but it was impossible to be too careful.

“So we start what...five years earlier?”

“Ten. Might as well. There ain’t that many records anyway.”

“Really? You don’ consider this ta be that many?”

“Nah. We’re lucky this’s a rural county, ‘cause otherwise we’d be here a week’r more.”

“S’pose that’s true,” Erwin grumbled, sucking down some coffee.

“Alright, I’ll take...’70 ta ’80, an’ you take ’81 ta ’91. That should ‘bout cover it.”

“Assumin’ he got a permit.”

“He’s got enough clout roun’ these parts...enough ta think e’s invincible. I’m sure ‘e followed the rules an’ lined every pocket ‘long tha way.”

“I hope yer right,” Erwin muttered. “Alright. Here goes.”

Erwin was surprised at how fast the search went. Any commercial buildings or small projects could be ignored, and any large projects that took place in residential neighborhoods could be tossed aside as well. Less than two hours later they had about a hundred possibilities, which they carefully culled down to about fifty. With those fifty permits in hand, they moved on to building plans.

Fifteen minutes later, Levi held up a set of plans with a triumphant look on his face. “Got ‘im.”

The house belonged to a William Christian Knight, heir of Christian Allen Knight. Erwin stared at the paper, a permit for massive remodeling in 1980. He shook it a bit, stared at it more. “You gotta be kiddin’...I...”

“What, ya know ‘im?”

“Everybody knows ‘im. The Knights owned half tha businesses in tha parishes when Knight Sr. was still alive. Bill Knight is a philanthropist...the football stadium at mah old high school was named for ‘im...or for ‘is family, at least. Knight Stadium. Ya can’t walk five feet in any’a these parishes without runnin’ into Knight somethin’-er-other. I bet even you heard of ‘em.”

“Yeah, but they seemed washed up ta me.”

“Well, everybody knows ol’ Bill got...reclusive-like, after ‘is dad died. They was real close, always together, an’ when he died, nobody saw much’a Bill no more.”

“An’ nobody foun’ that suspicious?”

Erwin shrugged, opened his mouth to justify it, and shrugged again. “Guess not...”

Levi shook his head. “Maybe I jus’ been doin’ this work too long, but god damn if that wouldn’t been tha first place I’d’ve looked fer missin’ kids. You remember what year ol’ Senior croaked?”

“Not really, I never much cared about tha movin’ a high society.”

“Make a copy’a that floor plan an’ permit. I’m gonna go check tha death records.”

As Erwin ran the shuddering old Xerox machine, he thought about Bill Knight, tried to conjure up some clues as to the man’s character or lifestyle, tried to figure what he might have missed. Bill Knight was a shadowy sort of figure. He’d inherited a pile of money and a veritable empire, but he’d sold the businesses off in fairly short order. Erwin remembered only the barest facts about the man—that he donated large amounts of money to school and churches, that he claimed to be a simple man, not a businessman like his father, more interested in charity than moneymaking. He’d never married, never had any children. Erwin had caught the significant looks that people shared when they described him as a “bachelor,” the kind of looks that connoted bachelorhood as a euphemism for something wholly unacceptable yet often perpetrated in polite society, a sin that Erwin shared. They might never have guess that Knight’s proclivities went well beyond the scope of what the typical “lifelong bachelor” enjoyed.

Still, it was difficult to imagine. Bill Knight was shy and soft-spoken, the very antithesis of his father. Erwin had only seen Knight Sr. in passing a few times at parish parades and ribbon-cuttings in his childhood. The man was squat and ruddy, perpetually grinning and smoking large brown cigars, slapping people on the back, and laughing until his guffaws dissolved into wheezing coughs. He’d married seven times—the prettiest girls in the Delta, if the talk was to be believed. His first wife was Bill’s mother, who died in childbirth. The other six girls were divorced quickly and quietly and, many said, never saw a cent of Knight’s fortune. A man could do that back in those days, especially if he lined the pockets of the judge.

Erwin knew the story just as well as anyone else. In these small towns, such stories were so ubiquitous, so often-told, that they became a part of your DNA, buried in the marrow of your bones. No one much talked about Bill, except to say he was a good man, a pillar of the community...and a life-long bachelor. The very suggestion of faggotry couldn’t be escaped, not even if it was unsubstantiated. Not even with a powerful daddy and a whole pile of money. Not even when the high school football stadium had been built in your name. So Erwin didn’t think about Bill Knight anymore, and he was fairly certain nobody else did either.

Society had chosen to cast him aside, though not overtly, because a rumor that he might be *that sort*. They’d never suspected he was far worse than any fag or queen. They’d never considered that he might be the Devil himself. What else could he be, though? Stealing children from their families and turning them into monsters for the amusement of the elite. Unbidden, the image of Ibis stretched out and tied down on the mattress filled his mind, the sound of her desperate laughter rang through his ears, and Erwin felt as though he might be ill all over again.

Levi walked back in, jaw set and grim. Erwin swallowed down his bile.

“He died in nineteen eighty. The same year ol’ Bill started ‘is renovations.”

“An’...” Erwin swallowed again, stomach turning, “Tha year ‘fore Matilda MaCarty went missin’.”

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When they got to the storage unit, Hange was waiting for them, sitting sprawled out in the bed of their truck, reading a Star Trek novel. They didn’t put their novel down until Erwin opened the door to the storage units and eventhen, it was with considerable reluctance.

“As nice as it is ta see ya so much,” Hange said, sidling up next to Levi, “This drive fuckin’ sucks. I ain’t barely slept in tha past two days.”

“I told ya you might wanna stick around,” Levi replied.

“Yeah well, I got complex shit goin’ on an’ it ain’t like I can just pull one’a them MC knuckleheads in ta keep an eye on it. Anyway, they get wind that I’m helpin’ you an it might not end well fer you.”

“Ya want a kiss’r somethin’?”

“Well, there is pair’a floggers I been lookin’ at.”

“Well, if I don’t get myself killed, they’re all yours.”

“You ain’t got yourself killed so far,” Hange shrugged. “I got faith in ya.”

“Thanks,” Levi rolled his eyes. “Now c’mon.”

Erwin was already in the storage unit, laying out the copies of the building permit and floor plan, marking the location on the map.

“Damn, ya’ll got a lot done,” Hange said, eyes wide as they looked around the storage unit.

“Sure ‘nough. We managed ta get what tha mayor had...and now we’re goin’ after Caesar.”

“You fig’gered out who ‘e is?”

“Yup...or we’re as sure as we’re gonna be, anyway. We need you ta hold on ta tha evidence...in case somethin’ happens ta us, yer gonna have ta distribute it an’ make sure it ain’t able ta be suppressed. Yer gonna send it on ta every level...city, county, state, an’ tha FBI. Should be enough in there ta get somebody lookin’, specially if they got two dead’r missin’ cops on their hands.”

“You really think this guy can take ya out?”

“Yer a hunter, Hange, ya know what a beast does when ‘e’s cornered.”

Hange nodded, grimaced.



“Anyway, yer gonna hold on ta this evidence, and yer gonna wait fer me ta call ya after we head over ta Bill Knight’s place. If I don’t call ya after ‘bout...twenty minutes in, yer gonna call up tha cops from a pay phone an’ tell ‘em there’s been a homicide at Knight’s address.”

“An’ if it’s too late?”

Levi shrugged. “We’re prepared ta accept tha consequences. You jus’ get that evidence sent out.”

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When Erwin was sure that Levi and Hange could handle the copying and sorting of the evidence, he went to run a few errands of his own. He and Jackie had created their wills when the Stephy was born, but they hadn’t been good about keeping them up. He needed to make sure that all of the pertinent information was valid, updated, and that everything would go to Jackie. He played it cool with his lawyer, Jim Little, making small talk over small cups of coffee, playing it off like he was taking some time off work to be with his family, excusing Jackie by saying she had to work and couldn’t come.

“Ya know it’ll be better if Jacks does this too,” Jim muttered, poring over the document. “Evelyn ain’t even in ‘er will, yet.”

“I’ll be sure ta tell ‘er,” Erwin smiled. Jim smiled back. Erwin wondered if he would represent Jackie in divorce court. If he made it through this, would that man offer the same false smile as he informed the judge that Erwin was an unfit parent? That he should lose his girls because of his own uncontrollable perversions?

“Mr. Smith?” Jim asked. Erwin realized he’d been staring, that Jim had risen, that he was expected to see his way out.

“Oh, my apologies,” Erwin said, standing, “Jus’ got a long list’a to-do’s today, it’s a little distractin’.”

“I understan’ completely,” Jim replied. “Gotta knock out that honey-do list fast as ya can, huh?”

“You know it. See ya, Jim.”

The lawyer was the easy part. Erwin knew that his next errand would prove far more difficult.

He pulled up outside of Lafayette General just as the clock hit two. Jackie would be leaving any time now to pick the girls up from school. As far as Erwin saw it, he had one chance to catch her; once she had the girls, he doubted that she would answer his calls, and if she saw him and panicked, he couldn’t afford her calling Mike, Nile, or anyone else on the force. He had to catch her here.

A few minutes later, she emerged.

Looking at her—tanned skin, dark brown hair, her very form moving with a remarkable steadfastness—Erwin felt a momentary sense of loss. Whatever his own issues had been, whatever had happened in the last few days or months, Jackie had been his rock for a long time now. She was the glue that held his life together, that held them all together, really. Maybe it wouldn't matter. Maybe he would die tonight, let the whole world go on without him, missed by few and not for long, the people he'd come to call "friends" undoubtedly ignorant of his ejection from his home, everyone crying for him here and there and then moving on with their sleepy Delta lives.

But supposing he survived...

He pushed his way out of the car, started toward Jackie. Her eyes flicked over to him, her expression clouding over in seconds. She turned and walked toward him, her whole body going rigid. She was a force to be reckoned with, the still waters running deep.

"The hell're ya doin' here, Erwin," she hissed, grabbing his elbow and pulling him over toward his car without breaking stride. "I thought I told ya I ain't gonna see you."

"Jackie, listen," he started, but it seemed he'd lost that privilege.

"No, you listen. I don't want you comin' ta my work, I don't want you comin' ta my house. If I wanna see you, if I wanna talk ta you, I'll come ta you, understand?"

She let go of his arm, gestured toward his car. Erwin sighed, looked down at his feet, and muttered, "I'm here ta say goodbye."

Finally, she looked up at him. "Huh?" she asked, brows furrowing. "What kinda goodbye?"

Erwin slid his hands into his pockets, rocked back and forth on his heels. "I can't tell ya tha particulars, fer yer own safety an' tha girls...but I settled things, Jacks. Talked ta Jim this mornin', you get everythin', of course...if anythin' happens."

She stared at him, mouth open for a moment before she pressed her lips into a thin line. "Erwin, if this is some kinda ploy ta see tha girls..."

"It ain't, Jackie," he insisted, voice dropping low. "It ain't...but jus'...if ya could tell 'em that I love 'em very much, an' that...that I'm sorry...fer bein' gone s'much...I'd really appreciate it. I don't want 'em thinkin' their daddy don't love 'em, Jacks. I know you don't want that neither."

Jackie's expression was frozen at first, but as he spoke, her consternation faded into something a little more raw, a little more open. "What's goin' on?" she asked, voice cracking slightly, "What're ya'll doin'?"

"Walkin' straight inta hell," Erwin muttered. "Hopin' we come back in one piece. But even if we don't...he's gotta be stopped, Jacks. That's all there is to it."

She stared at him for a long time, the afternoon sun pulling out the golden hues in her brown eyes. Looking at her like this, standing in her scrubs, sunlight streaming across her face, the

breeze playing with loose tendrils of hair that escaped her ponytail, Erwin felt a strange sense of peace. If he never saw her again, he wanted to remember her this way, fierce and strong, angry and beautiful. Like this, he knew she could survive anything. “Jacks,” he said softly, reaching forward, taking her hands in his, “I love you. I always loved you.”

She bit her lower lip, swallowed thickly, and pulled her hands away. “Stop,” she whispered, swiping at her eyes. “Leave.”

“Okay,” Erwin said, holding his hands up in surrender. “I’m goin’...jus’...tell tha girls, okay?”

Jackie nodded, turned, and walked away.

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Hange hit rewind, picked up a sharpie and scrawled “EVIDENCE” on the side of a plastic protective case. Their hands were clad in black lambskin gloves, hair pulled up under a hat, glasses sliding down their nose as they watched the little green numbers counting down.

“Crash?” they asked, leaning back until Levi came into their field of vision. He was tinkering away with his guns, cleaning them thoroughly, taking gray pains to make sure each was in perfect working order.

“Hmm?”

“What’s on this tape, exactly?”

“Somethin’ you ain’t never gonna see,” Levi muttered. “An’ you better not fuckin’ try’n watch it.”

“Is it awful?”

“Do ya need ta ask?”

Hange sighed loudly and clicked their tongue. “Yer *sure* ya need fifteen copies?”

“Ain’t no reason ta take chances, Einstein.”

“Do I get somethin’ fer my valuable contributions to yer investigation?”

“Yeah, I won’t implicate ya an’ I’ll fail ta mention Pinwheel in tha reports.”

With an exaggerated frown, Hange popped the VHS out of the duplication machine and snapped it into its case. “You always did drive a hard bargain, kiddo.”

Levi grunted and went back to his work.

In truth, Hange didn’t mind driving all these miles day after day. Their cabin in the woods, their lab, their Sonny and Bean were a haven in many ways, of course. There they were safe, surrounded by most of the things that made them happy, with instant access to their own

private lab and very few restrictions. It was quiet, in the woods. And after Isabel, after Farlan—after Levi took all those pills and ran away—well, it became very quiet indeed.

Hange knew that this was temporary. Levi wouldn't come back to Arkansas for any meaningful period of time, Hange wouldn't leave, and all for the same reason: the MC. Neither of them could afford to piss off the wrong people, and there was no corner of this country that the Angels couldn't reach, one way or another. They'd thought about defecting to another group, but after Izzy and Farlan, they didn't think it was too far-fetched to consider any betrayal a death sentence. Sometimes, they wondered if even Levi's days were numbered.

Either way, this interlude wouldn't last. Levi was going to move on with his life one way or another, and Hange knew they would have to let him. He never liked being tied down in the figurative sense; even when the four of them had lived in relative harmony, Levi had always felt tenuous, ghost-like, there, but at the same time, not there at all. Hange had always assumed that it was because he was undercover, that protecting his identity had taken precedence over his emotional bonds. Even when they had him strung up, bruised, sweating, drooling, cursing in ecstasy...even then, Levi had felt strangely far away. Hange wondered if Levi felt that way to Erwin, too, or if that philandering closet case had something beyond the sum of his parts.

The door to the storage unit rolled open and, as if summoned, Erwin ducked inside. "Hey there," he said, eyes flicking over the two of them. "Where're we at?"

"We got copies of all tha paper evidence an' pictures. Hange's gonna keep tha originals. If sumthin' happens ta us, they're gonna wait an' see who takes on tha case an' provide the originals when it becomes necessary. Now we're jus' puttin' together tha las-minute preparations an' copyin' tha tapes."

Erwin reached over and pulled out a cigarette. "Hange, can I ask ya somethin'?"

"Shoot," Hange said, trying to sound nonchalant despite the edge in Erwin's tone.

"Well firs' of all, you watch that tape?"

"No, an' they ain't gonna," Levi snapped, whipping around.

"Don't ya fig'ger they should?" Erwin asked, lighting his cigarette. "I mean I fig'ger if they make it they should know what it's bein' used fer."

Hange laughed softly, the sound strained. "Hey Big Man," they said, reaching for a cigarette of their own. "I ain't watched tha video, but if ya think I ain't aware my drug's bein' used fer...nefarious purposes, then yer as dumb as ya look. What're ya thinkin', that I make this shit an' just expect it ta be different than the meth an' tha coke an' whatever else people're usin' these days? I fig'gered a long time ago that if I was gonna live offa this, I was gonna have ta say 'fuck it,' an' I have. The drug ain't got no morality, an' I ain't responsible fer the morality'a those who use it."

They pulled a drag off of their cigarette, turned and looked at Levi. “Besides, Crash don’t want me watching the video, so I ain’t. End’a story.”

“That’s convenient, ya know,” Erwin said, eyes still on Hange. “That you can jus’ wash yer hands of it all.”

Hange looked up at him and blew a thin stream of smoke from their lips. Finally, with an incongruous smile, they muttered, “Well Big Man, we all do what we gotta in tha name of survival, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, eyes flicking over to Levi. “S’pose we do.”

“Enough,” Levi said, standing, stretching his arms above his head and arching his back. “Ya’ll can bicker later. We got work to do.”

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By the time the sun was setting, they were loading fifteen manila envelopes marked “EVIDENCE” into banker’s boxes. Each envelope contained a full copy of all of the evidence they had, including copies of the notes from Levi’s notebook and statements signed by both himself and Erwin. The original copies were in the lockbox in the back of Hange’s truck. With everything ready to go, Levi pulled down the storage unit door and locked it. He dropped the keys into Hange’s hand, but instead of taking them, they grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

“God damnit,” Levi whispered, but Hange just held him tighter.

“Crash,” they said, arms squeezing him tightly. “Please don’ die.”

“Ya know I can’t promise nothin’,” Levi muttered back.

“I know but...please don’t die, okay? Jus’ don’t.”

“I’ll do mah best.”

A few seconds passed, and finally, Hange let go. They turned to Erwin and looked him up and down. “You best not let ‘im die.” There was a threat in their eyes that hadn’t been present in any of the violence they’d done thus far, a threat reserved for this situation alone. For Erwin.

Erwin looked back at them, their auburn hair glinting red and purple in the light of the dying sun, eyes flashing, jaw set, and he nodded. “I ain’t plannin’ on it.”

Levi shook his head. “Hey, ya still got yer pager?”

“Yeah, of course,” Hange replied, tapping their pocket.

“We don’t call ya by...” he checked his watch. “Ten-thirty, that gives us two hours ta get there, get in, an’ take ‘im down...if we don’ call by then, call in tha cops. Tell ‘em there’s been a homicide. Do it from a payphone, too, an’ wipe down yer prints.”

“This ain’t my firs’ time,” Hange said. “Go. Trus’ me, I’m gonna be callin’ ‘em at ten thirty on tha dot.”

Levi nodded and looked over at Erwin. “Ya got yer gun?”

Erwin patted the holster under his jacket. “Gun, knife. I’m ready.”

Levi nodded, his lips set in a line, and without another word, he turned and walked toward the truck. Erwin waved at Hange before falling in behind him. In the truck, they were quiet, aside from Levi’s smoking and Erwin’s occasional directions. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, the dark settling over the Delta land around them as they drove, Erwin finally pulling out a flashlight to consult the map. He was surprised to feel a strange sense of calm settling over him. Whatever happened, happened. He was prepared for anything, everything. He was ready to face the devil, and more than ready to put a bullet between the man who’d proven himself to be a monster. As Levi’s smoke slid around the cabin of the truck, Erwin couldn’t help but hope he felt that same peace. Maybe it was strange to walk into the maw of hell with a sigh of relief, but after all this time, he was ready to end this.

Half a mile from the house, Levi pulled over and cut the engine. It was better that they didn’t alert Knight to their presence, not this early, anyway. He didn’t move to exit the car immediately.

“So fuckin’ clingy,” Levi mused with a grimace, taking a last, long pull off the butt of the cigarette. Erwin tore his gaze away from the road in front of him, he felt like it had been locked there for days.

“Huh?”

“Hange. They just gotta get over it. I ain’t never gonna go back there. I can’t. Jesus.” He looked perturbed and restless, the last rites of an exorcism. They had work to do, but Levi was only human and his brain was reeling after sleepless nights and thoughts of Caesar running roughshod. “ ’n they go puttin’ their hands all over me like-“

Erwin stopped his ramble with a, “Levi.”

Levi glanced over at him and away guiltily; Erwin fixed his eyes forward again. Levi knew he’d been caught acting like a human being with feelings, regrets, all that nasty shit and Erwin’s chest ached for him.

“They love you, okay? Plain and simple. They never stopped lovin’ you when they started. Don’t damn people to hell for lovin’ you when they’re helpless to it.” While Erwin didn’t like the idea of Hange’s hands on him, in familiar ways, in intimate places, it had nothing to do with anyone else’s sin but his own. They both couldn’t stand sharing. He understood them in a way because they loved Levi, and that was something private and vitally important they shared.

A few seconds passed and Erwin felt Levi turn to stone again. He was grateful; if Levi was bloodless, impenetrable, nothing could wound him.

Levi crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and turned to him, face half-silvered by the moonlight, features set.

“You ready?” he asked.

A thousand words flashed through Erwin’s mind, a thousand ways he could reply, a thousand things they’d left unsaid, but he pushed them aside, nodded, breathed.

“Well then,” Levi muttered, looking out the windshield, down the road. “Let’s go slay the beast.”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, first things first; fanart! mayorquirk drew this adorable [Levi](#), which is not doubt the most adorable version I've seen, and my darling lovely -heichoubutt drew [this gorgeous picture](#) of our boys gettin' ready for the sexyness. Thank you guys so much!

# The Void Stares Back

## Chapter Summary

*“What took you so long, little soldier?”* the voice whispered. Levi’s lips pressed into a thin line. There was a door to the left at the end of the hall. He pushed through it to find himself in another hall, this one branching off into two ways.

*“I’ve been lying in wait for you.”*

## Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter is quite violent.

Notes at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the silvery moonlight, they slipped through the trees, each moving slowly and staying in sight of the other. Neither could be sure of what they would find, but it would be better to maintain the element of surprise...if indeed they had it at all. There was no way of knowing if Knight was expecting them, if he had been tracking their movements, if he’d guessed that they would be coming after him. They had to be prepared for the possibility either way. When they reached the edge of the woods, they abruptly found themselves in an open clearing, large and well-manicured, grass cut short.

Nowhere to hide.

Levi broke from the trees first, walking with quiet determination toward the mansion in the middle of the clearing. It was palatial, an obvious homage to the old plantations that dotted the Mississippi River. Porches wrapped the whole way round the perimeter of the house, one at the second story and one at the first. The house was white with black shutters and great, thick columns. Several of the windows spilled buttery light onto the lawn below, and an opulent chandelier shown through a half-circle window above the door. Everything about it looked perfectly placed and put together in a way that Erwin hadn’t quite expected.

“Psst,” he hissed over at Levi, “Ya think he knew we was comin’?”

“Could’a been,” Levi whispered back.



They made their way up the porch slowly, cautiously, looking to find some sort of trap, but there was nothing, just a great big house like any other. Had he never seen the video, Erwin might have doubted that they had their man, but the evidence added up. They were in the right place.

“Erwin,” Levi whispered, “The door.”

Erwin’s eyes fell to the door, the handle. He stared for a moment, unsure of what he was looking for at first, but then—there—he saw it, the tiniest sliver of light just around the edges of the door frame. He looked back at Levi and whispered, “It’s open.”

“Guess that answers yer question from earlier, then,” Levi replied. “He’s expectin’ us... which means we can expect him ta have some shit waitin’ fer us.”

“So what’re we gonna do?”

Levi frowned, looked up at the mansion, and shook his head. “There’s jus’ two of us. We gotta better chance if we split up, ya know.”

“How ya fig’ger that?” Erwin whispered back.

“If they get one’a us, tha other’n can still...have a chance.”

Erwin frowned. “Yeah, but...”

“Yer a trained officer, Erwin, an’ I fig’ger we got tha physical advantage.”

“But they got the home advantage.”

“Exactly. An’ if this place’s rigged, neither one’a us can risk bein’ caught in tha same trap.”

Erwin sighed and cursed. “Yer sure?”

“If ya see a way around it, now’d be tha time ta say so.”

In truth, he didn’t, but Erwin still spent a minute or so trying to conjure one up. Finally, Levi said, “Enough. I’ll go round tha back. You take tha front. I go down, you go up.”

Erwin nodded.

“An’...keep yer eyes open. They could’a rigged this whole place, or they might jus’ be layin’ in wait. Don’t start thinkin’ ya know what ta expect if they don’ pop out at ya firs’ thing an’...an’ be careful.”

“Yeah,” Erwin whispered, “You too.”

Levi nodded, turned, and melted into the darkness, weapon in hand. Erwin slid his gun out of his holster, steeled his nerves, and crept up to the door. He inhaled through his mouth, blew the breath out through his nose, and pushed the door open, swinging his body into the foyer gun-muzzle first.

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Levi made his way around the back of the mansion with quick, quiet steps. Perfectly manicured lawns were perfect for sneaking about on—there were no sticks, no leaves there to make a sound. If Levi had a lawn, he would let it grow wild, would throw bits of barbed wire and scrap metal into it. No one would ever have a chance to sneak up to his front porch without him knowing ten times over. A man like Knight, a man who knew he was hunted and still kept such a clean lawn...it was sheer arrogance. Just like the mayor.

The back door to the mansion wasn't cracked open, but it was unlocked. Levi turned the handle slowly, then pushed through the door all at once, gun raised.

Nothing.

He moved through the first floor quickly, sliding around corners, clearing each room in turn. Erwin might have already been through this part—Levi could hear his footsteps disappearing up the staircase—but it ran counter to Levi's nature not to check. The house was opulent, dark woods, plush area rugs, marble pillars, crystal chandeliers. It was a monument and a mockery. Levi imagined Ibis' toes sinking into the rug, imagined the light thrown by the crystals reflecting itself in Gabriel's eyes and his stomach twisted. He was water, he was steel. He flowed through each room. He moved with deadly precision. Above him, he heard Erwin's gait but no one else's, he was sure of it. The house was strangely silent. That didn't bode well; a man who came out with guns blazing was easier to eliminate than one who hid like a snake in the grass, but there was no sense in stopping. They'd come so far.

In the living room, candlelight glinted off of a grand piano, a marble bust of a man. Levi didn't recognize a goddamn thing. The video, the parties...it wasn't here. Levi remembered stark rooms, dark corners, there were no carpets there. The harder the floor, the easier it was to clean the blood, and even men so arrogant must have known that the screams wouldn't be heard, otherwise the girls, the children would have been gagged. There had to be something else. The building permit hadn't specified a basement, but a man like Knight could've slipped money into the right pockets. Caesar fancied himself an emperor, but he was just a worm crawling through the detritus of his father's grave.

He had to find his way down. He didn't suspect that it would be anything simple—no average basement door tucked away in the kitchen, no faux mirrors that opened into doors for Caesar. He was a man obsessed with drama, with the theatrical; whatever entrance he'd built to the mouth of his own private hell, it would be in like-kind. Levi moved through each room, slower this time, opening every door, inspecting every corner.

Back in the sitting room, his eyes landed on the bust yet again. It sat upon a pedestal, proud and cold in its pale relief, eyes too buggy and, in Levi's opinion, quietly horrified. The more he stared at the man's face, the more grotesque it seemed, distorted in the details, as though it was meant to be a mockery instead of a tribute. There was no doubt in his mind that the bust was of Knight Sr., and that Knight had commissioned it in some strange form of retribution... or some fucked-up acid-induced nightmare. Any shrink would have a field day trying to pick apart exactly how the statue deviated from the features of its subject, but Levi had no time or patience for that. With a frown, he grasped the bust in his hands and tried to tilt it.

It wouldn't budge.

He tried to turn it clockwise, and then counter clockwise, but it wouldn't move. He pressed down on it, tried to lift it, pressed at it this way and that to see if any particular features would give beneath his fingers, but there was nothing. It wasn't until he pressed all of his weight down and turned the bust at the same time that he was finally, finally able to get it to move. For a second, nothing happened, but just as he was getting ready to give up, the bookcase next to the fireplace slid open. Levi stole over to it and swung into the doorway, gun out, only to find himself staring down a smokey staircase, torches burning on sconces in the walls. At first, he only breathed, only stared down into the flickering darkness, but he saw no shadowy figures, no trip wires, no obvious signs of anything at all. With a deep breath, he took his first step down into the shadows, the smoke stinging at his eyes. At first, all he could hear was the pounding of his own heart in his ears.

Then, a voice, a whisper slipped through the air around him, coming from nowhere in particular, from everywhere all at once.

*"I've been waiting for you, Detective."*

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Erwin had heard the back door open just as he'd stolen up the stairs. Levi was, of course, as quiet as a ghost. For his part, Erwin heard every step creak beneath him as he walked, mentally cursing himself for being so clumsy. Levi stole about like a shadow, an instrument of precision. It was precisely the type of work that Erwin's physicality was ill-suited for. Still, he pressed on, rounding the corner at the top of stairs and looking left, then right. He was at the mouth of a long white hallway with dark, hardwood floors, a plush, persian-style rug running down its length. It was the longest hallway Erwin had ever seen, extending at least a hundred feet on either side, punctuated at regular intervals by ornate wooden doors, art on the walls, small tables holding decorative vases full of what looked like fresh flowers.

Erwin moved toward one of the vases, leaning down to smell the bouquet it held. It couldn't have been more than a day or so old. *Overkill*, Erwin thought, but he was moving down the hallway already. He didn't have a choice but to check one door at a time, didn't have a choice but to hope that they were unlocked. If he had to break them down, he would, but he didn't want to make that kind of noise. At the same time, he wasn't sure that it mattered. Anyone truly listening would have heard the evidence of his presence in the squeaking of the floor. He pushed it from his mind and moved for the first door to the right.

The doorknob turned easily, but he slid the door open slowly anyway, eyes peeled for trip wires and booby traps. When he was reasonably sure that there were none, he pushed the door open and stepped inside. It was a room, just a room, wholly unremarkable: a bed, a dresser, a bedside table and a small lamp. The lamp was on, washing the room in a soft light. Erwin frowned. Perhaps the next room...

He made his way down the hall one room at a time, each room more similar to the others that it was unique—antique furniture, small lamps, perfectly made beds, absolutely nothing outside the ordinary. By the twelfth room, he had to remind himself to check for booby traps, for trip wires. Perhaps Levi had been wrong, perhaps there was nothing waiting for them

here, or perhaps just Caesar himself. Perhaps he was holed away somewhere in his own private labyrinth, maybe with Janus or maybe not. Perhaps he'd already performed a murder-suicide. His cowardice seemed clear to Erwin. If he really was expecting them to show up here, maybe he'd chosen to end it on his own terms.

*Don't start thinkin' ya know what ta expect...* Levi's words surfaced in his memory, and he swallowed and nodded. He couldn't let his guard down...not until he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt. Not until this was over. Maybe not even then.

The fifteenth door he came to didn't seem any different from the others in form, but as soon as it swung open, Erwin knew something was off. The room looked lived-in, personalized, disheveled in a way that the other rooms had not. The bed in each of the other rooms had been pushed up against the far wall, dresser next to the door, small bedside table and lamp to the right of the bed. The bed in this room sat squarely in the center and was unmade. Small spotlights shone on it from each corner of the room. There was no other furniture, just a large door in the far left corner. Erwin waited, listened, but there was nothing but the same eerie quiet that had filled the hallway. Slowly, carefully, he stepped toward the door, noted that it slid on tracks instead of turning on a hinge, that it was padded with velvet that was dark in color, though he couldn't tell if it was purple or blue. It looked out of place here, strangely unlike the aesthetic of the rest of the house.

He drew close to it, put one hand on it, the other grasping his gun. With a deep breath, he tugged the door back on its tracks, leveling his gun at the darkness that lay behind it.

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It was difficult to tell if the floor was tilted, or if it was a trick of Levi's own perception. He'd made it down the stairs and into a dark hallway that looked like it ended about five paces away. With his gun in one hand and his flashlight in the other, he moved forward.

*"What took you so long, little soldier?"* the voice whispered. Levi's lips pressed into a thin line. There was a door to the left at the end of the hall. He pushed through it to find himself in another hall, this one branching off into two ways.

*"I've been lying in wait for you."*

Levi said nothing, tried to mentally note any distinguishing features of this hall, lest it branch off several times more. He wished that he had some string, something to mark his passage, but he'd been expecting a house, not a labyrinth. It was clear that the whispers were coming through some kind of speaker system, though they felt eerily close, like someone was standing next to him...though no one could have been. It would have been impossible.

*"You won't find me so quickly,"* the voice slipped around him again, the hairs on his neck standing on end, *"But surely your curious little mind is burning with questions. Tell me, little soldier, what are the answers that you seek?"*

Levi decided to start with left turns. He knew he had to pick a direction and stick with it—there was no telling how large this maze really was, and he didn't have time for bullshit. He needed to neutralize or eliminate the threat, and quickly. He needed to get back to Erwin. He

made his way around the corner, scanning this new hall with his flashlight. The walls here were made of stone and the sound ricocheted off them hopelessly. He moved forward.

*“Come now....surely you know that you’re marching to your death. But I know you, Levi, you’ve been marching toward your death for so long.”*

Levi felt his blood run cold. His suicide attempt wasn’t documented anywhere, and the rest of it...the rest of it was just duty, in service of the case. It was a guess, it must have been a guess. A conjecture based on his behavior, nothing more.

*“You’re wondering what I mean when I say I know you? A secret like yours, Levi, in a place like this...”*

It was a bluff. Everyone had a secret.

*“Sleeping with your partner.”*

Levi swung around the next hallway, to the left, always to the left.

*“It’s alright, I’ll let the two of you take that secret to your graves. Which is remarkably kind of me...I doubt you would extend the same courtesy.”*

Dead end. No doors. Levi turned, worked his way back. Right turns.

*“Pity, I thought you’d be more talkative. Perhaps I should compel you?”*

Levi was silent, working his way back through the halls, back to where he started.

*“You know, despite your attempts to thwart me, I have still kept one little bird.”* There was an element of amusement in his voice that gave Levi the urge to pistol-whip him in his smiling teeth.

Levi was getting tired of this, tired of the whispers and their obvious attempts to rile him up, tired of these endless black halls and their torches. He wanted to find Knight, to end this. It was that, more than anything, that compelled him to finally reply, “Janus.”

*“Good,”* the voice whispered, *“Very good. I couldn’t remember what was on the tape, you know...it’s been years.”*

*“Even if ya’d gotten Andrew, he wouldn’t been yer little killin’ machine yet.”*

*“Perhaps not, but you never know. Children possess a darker nature, if one knows how to extract it.”*

A wave of anger washed over Levi, and he grit his teeth.

*“Oh, did I touch a nerve?”*

Levi swung around another corner, found himself in another stone hall that branched off into rooms. There were no doors. They could have been the rooms from the video, but it was

difficult to tell. This underground couldn't extend on forever; Levi was starting to get a sense of the space. It had to be smaller than it felt, just a clever use of space, of twists and turns. He knew that somewhere there was a great room, a room with a pit in the middle...but was Caesar there? He thought about the idea that Caesar might not be down here at all, might be in another part of the house entirely, watching Levi on cameras, whispering into a microphone. Or he could be doing the same thing from a room down here. Levi wasn't interested in playing this game all night, wasn't interested in drawing this out. He needed to end this, needed to find Knight and kill him, needed to get back to Erwin, needed to see if they could take Janus alive.

*"Pity. I've been wanting to speak to you for so long. There's something about you, detective... what was it about this case?"*

Levi stopped his exploration of the rooms, his eyes fixed on a cross that sat in the middle of one of them. He didn't want to see Ibis there, to see Gabriel tied up and stretched across it's length, but it was hard to avoid the images from the video flashing before his minds eye. He tore his eyes away, kept moving down the hall.

"I got one question," he muttered out into the hallway. "Matilda MaCarty? She wasn't no ice cream truck kidnappin'."

*"Good," Knight whispered. "I wasn't yet bold enough...my first little bird...her father brought her to me."*

Levi felt his rage crystallize into something white-hot, something that felt like it would burn right through him and then just keep burning, burn down this whole disgusting place and all the blood and filth that it harbored, burn this whole damn city, this parish, the whole god dam world for all her cared. The image of Ibis swam before him, not quite a specter, but there nonetheless, her bleached-brittle hair, those sores around her mouth. Levi nearly turned and punch the wall, but recognized the futility of it just in time.

*"I just wanted three. Three sweet little birds. Three that could sing in perfect harmony. I never asked too much of them, really, but ultimately they were disappointments. Janus is the closest I've come to success, but cells replicate, bodies expire. He is reaching the end of his usefulness to me, then I suppose he'll fall from the nest like the others."*

"Fall?" Levi asked, jaw clenched.

*"All little birds have a chance to fly at Mama's urging, though not all can. I suppose that's what started all of this, isn't it? But little birds have to stretch their own wings sometime. If not, they become a burden. They must make room for the next brood if they cannot be worthy of my name."*

Levi reached up to find his pulse. It was hammering so hard that he barely had to touch his neck to feel it. His whole body was throbbing. He told himself not to lose focus, but it was near-impossible.

*"My methods were a bit crude at first, of course I can admit that. But considering how well Janus turned out, I imagine my next brood will be significantly more refined."*

“You ain’t gettin’ a ‘next brood,’ ya sick fuck,” Levi spat out. He was coming up on a door now, bigger than all the others. He was sure that it led to the feasting room from the video. He breathed, steeled his nerves, though his vision was going strangely white around this edges. *Not now*, he thought to himself, *Please, not now*.

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Beyond the sliding door there was only darkness. Erwin pointed his flashlight down the hall, moved in slowly, carefully. A few steps in, he realized that there were rooms branching off of the hall, but these were different—they had three opaque walls, but the wall that faced the hallway was made entirely of clear plexiglass. There was slot in the door, like a prison...a place where food or items could be passed through. In each room there was a bed, a television, and a plastic set of drawers. The first two rooms were made up perfectly, empty, clearly waiting for an occupant. The third room, by contrast, was clearly lived in. The bed was disheveled, the walls plastered with drawings, clothes littering the floor.

*Janus*, Erwin thought, peering into the darkness. He was on his guard, eyes scanning the room for any information, so intently focused that when the TV flickered to life, he nearly shot it. It took a moment to regain his composure, to check the hall, to make sure that he was still alone here. Satisfied, he came back to stand before the clear wall of the room, eyes settling on the screen.

The movie was some sort of creepy claymation, three little kids in some kind of contraption, like an elevator. The doors opened, and they were face to face with a strange sort of headless body who held up a mask in lieu of a face. Erwin could hear it, could hear the creature say his name was Satan. It brought back a memory, a memory of Stephy calling home around midnight, sobbing and begging them to come retrieve her from her friend’s sleepover. Jackie had done it—she said it was better for Stephy to have her mom at a time like this. The next morning, when Erwin had asked what happened, Jackie told him there was a movie the girls were watching, and a particular scene had scared Stephy so bad she couldn’t sleep. When Erwin asked Stephy what happened in the movie, she described a headless angel named Satan, a town made of small men, and the angel killing all the tiny men with earthquakes and lightning. Erwin had been angry, had asked what the hell kind of movie that was for a child to watch, had nearly called the parents to have words, but Jackie had stopped him.

“It’s just part’a growin’ up,” she’d said, eyes warm, a smile on her face. “She can’t be afraid forever, an’ I don’ even think tha parents knew they was watchin’ it. Calm down.”

It was this, this strange fucked up scene, that had gotten under Stephy’s skin so bad that she risked her friend’s ire to call her parents and come home in the middle of a party. Watching it, Erwin could hardly blame her. But as the scene went on, he watched the angel Satan fashion a small clay man, watched him hand the children balls of clay so that they could make clay men of their own, and suddenly he felt like he might be sick. The angel began killing the clay men, and horrible scenes of death and destruction ensued. After it all, the angel said, “I can do no wrong, for I do not know what it is.”

Erwin felt bile rise up in his throat, felt his heart racing wildly. It was a line he’d never forget, a line he’d heard from the lips of Ibis and Gabriel. It was this place, this was the prison where they’d been kept. Their strange modes of speech, those lines they spouted that sounded like

crazy-talk, Erwin realized with sudden clarity that those were lines they'd been fed, or lines that they'd heard, at least, again and again. The clay men were a part of the ritual but also a part of their programming. As for the genitalia that they had or didn't, Erwin could only infer that they had modeled them in the image of the men who raped and tormented them. He was shaking. He was ill. He needed to find Levi. He turned.

Janus was standing in the door of the hall, bleached white-blond hair falling lank around his face, a wicked smile stretched across his face, an enormous knife clasped in his hand. He was clad in a plain white shirt, blue scrub pants, his feet bare. The clothing hung large on his lean frame, as though it had all been scrounged up from a secondhand bin at a church. Compared to the lushness of the house, Janus looked...meager.

"Janus," Erwin started, "I don' wanna hurt you, son. I'm here ta help you, get ya ta safety, understand?"

Janus flipped the knife in his hand effortlessly, so that it stuck straight out in front of him.

"I met yer brother an' sister ya know," Erwin said softly, "Ibis an' Gabriel? I helped them, an' I can help you too. I know ya ain't responsible fer any'a this, son. You don' gotta be scared. Jus' come with me, an' I'll keep ya safe."

"They ain't my kin," Janus replied, his voice quiet but firm. He was different from the other two; he wasn't crazed in the way that Ibis had been, wasn't sad like Gabriel. He was calm, he was quiet, he was deadly as a viper. Erwin swallowed, raised his gun, trying to control his breathing and ignore the cold sweat that was forming at his temple.

"Janus, I don' wanna shoot you. I wanna get you outta here, let you live, put this life behind you. Put tha knife down, son. Put the knife down, step back, and raise yer arms."

Janus' head was already shaking back and forth, though, his body slipping and edging itself into a stance that Erwin knew well, a fighting stance. "I know about you, detective," he said softly, "An' I know what men like you do. I ain't goin' nowhere, an' you an' yer partner are gonna die here t'night. An' that's all."

"Hey now," Erwin said, his voice deep, steady, as calm as he could manage, "Listen ta me, Janus. This man yer helpin', Knight? Caesar? Whatever he has ya callin' 'im...he's gonna steal more kids, jus' like you. An' once 'e's got 'em, he's gonna cut ya loose jus' like Ibis'n'Gabriel. An' yer gonna have no place ta go. If ya come with me now, I can help ya. I can help ya so you don' end up in prison, how about that?"

"I belong in mah father's house," Janus muttered. "There are many rooms here. I can do no wrong. I am the apple of his eye."

"Yeah but...Janus," Erwin murmured, "Yer what now...fifteen? Sixteen? He ain't gonna keep ya much longer, son. You know that. Yer gettin' too old for 'im. You know he's workin' on 'is next victim now. He tried ta get one, did ya know that? But tha kid fought back, an' Caesar killed 'im. That's how all this started, ya know. That dead boy lead us right here, ta you. An' we don' want any more dead kids'r anythin', an' we want you alive, Janus, an'



well. So drop the knife, son. Let me get ya outta here. I promise I ain't gonna let nothin' bad happen ta you."

He saw it, then, saw Janus wavering, saw him chew at the blistered skin of his lips, saw his brows knit together slightly.

"Good," Erwin murmured in that same calm voice. "Jus' set down the knife, an back away from it with yer hands up. I jus' need ta know ya ain't gonna hurt me."

Janus crouched down slowly, extending his arm and setting the knife down on the floor.

"Good, good," Erwin encouraged him, allowing a small smile, "You're doin' great."

He stepped forward slowly, first one step, then another. Janus scooted back about a foot, began to rise. Erwin began to drop his gun, a gesture of good faith. Janus smiled.

Janus launched himself down the hall so fast that Erwin didn't really have time to register what was happening. The boy hit him with such force that it knocked him straight back, the wind forced from his lungs by the impact. Janus was laughing, screaming primally as he brought the knife down. Erwin tried to turn away, to ridge the blow, but still the knife managed to lodge so deep into his arm that he could feel it scrape against his humerus on its way past it. There was no time to scream, to yell, to react to the pain, he had to get his gun, had to end this before Janus could land a blow to his heart, to his guts, to a major artery. They struggled viciously, Erwin's arm burning with pain, Janus wrenching blindly at whatever he could reach to dislodge the knife while Erwin wrestled him madly. He managed to push and kick, to shove the boy off, but Janus had gotten his grip on the handle first. The force of Erwin's blow not only threw Janus into the plexiglass wall, it dislodged the knife. Janus had his weapon back and Erwin couldn't find his gun.

Janus had been stunned by the force of the impact, but Erwin was recovering just enough to breath, to move. He saw the gun in the corner at the end of the hall, caught the shape of it in the flickering television light that still emanated from Janus' room. There was no time left for negotiation, no hope left for the boy—this was simple, kill or be killed. Erwin dove for the gun, grabbed it up in blood-slicked hands and rolled over but Janus was already rushing toward him, already falling onto him, knife in hand, a grin stretched across his blistered lips.

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"*Did you hear that?*" the voice whispered. Levi had, but he said nothing.

*"That's my boy, my Janus. He was always a natural...just born that way, all violence and pleasure, a child of hedonism. Now he's killed your partner. The two of you did an excellent job playing right into our hand, you know. I knew you would choose to come down here alone, face me alone...because you wanted me, Levi. You wanted to watch the life drain from me and you were too selfish to share that gift with your partner. You wanted me all for yourself, didn't you, Levi? And now he's dead, and I've got you all to myself. It will be I who has the pleasure of watching the light leave your eyes, Little Warrior. And it will be you who can die with the confidence of knowing that you killed your lover as well, that he died terrifically at the hands of my little Janus, child of violence. It will be you who can die*

*knowing that all of this will be swept under the rug, that the two of you will be painted as rogue cops who lost their way, who attacked a harmless man who's given so much to this community...perhaps I can even get the press to say that you killed one another..."*

Levi's mouth was dry, his pulse jumping erratically. He pushed through the door, trying to ignore the whisper, trying to ignore the words and focus on the space around him, before him. He had to find Caesar, had to end him. He couldn't think about Erwin, now, couldn't think about him dead or dying, couldn't think about where the bullet might have entered, couldn't think about exit wounds or brain matter or blood, the way someone died so fast when a bullet moved through their skull and the stickiness of the gore they left behind, the way you could scrub and scrub and never quite remove it, how the feel of it stayed beneath your fingernails. Levi's breath was coming in gasps and heaves, stars swimming around his vision.

*"...his daughters. It's a small town, Levi. How do you suppose they'll feel, knowing their Daddy died in such a shameful way? Perhaps I can get in touch with the family...offer my condolences, set up an endowment for the children's education...I wonder how close I can get. Close enough to smell their hair? To offer them vacations at my cabin on Lake Peigneur? No little girls should grow up without a daddy, you know..."*

Levi tried to push the words away. He couldn't lose it here, not now, Erwin couldn't be dead, no, there was still time, he had to end Knight, had to end him before those whispers drove him insane. He scanned the torchlit room, the long tables surrounding a recessed pit in the floor with a drain in the middle, just like the video. They hadn't bothered to scrub the blood stains from the concrete floors and Levi wondered how many missing whores had met their ends here, how many times Janus and Ibis and Gabriel had killed, had been brought down here and used as toys for the amusement of anyone who could afford to pay the admission. He could hear their voices, now, echoing around the chamber, surrounding and flowing through the ever-present sound of Caesar's whisper, and Levi thought he might have already gone mad but knew he had to continue on, he couldn't stop here, couldn't lose it now.

"Come out now, you crazy fuck," he hissed, "C'mon, stop fuckin' hiding and come out. Face me like a fuckin' man."

*"I hope for your sake," the whispered echoed around the chamber, "That you die with more dignity than your partner."*

Just as Levi opened his mouth to reply, a scream reverberated through the chamber, so loud and so close and so distinctly Erwin that it took Levi's breath away.

"No," he whispered, he blinked, and then before him there was Andrew, there was Ibis, there was Lottie Jenkins, Gabriel, Isabel, Jane Doe, Farlan...and Erwin. Each of them there, each of them a ghost, stares accusing, silent mouths. Levi felt something inside him give way when his gaze fixed on the blind eyes of Erwin's ghost, finding the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead, his mind processing that for all they'd done, they'd failed; that Janus had put a bullet through Erwin's brain and that Levi was next, that Caesar would win after all and they would be left...

No...no, he could still fight, could still kill Caesar even if he died trying. He raised his gun, screamed "Come out!" one last time, but the ghosts were screaming back at him, and they'd

never spoken a word before but they were screaming, light pouring out of their overstretched mouths, eyes blackened, the whole of it crescendoing into a roar, and Levi couldn't be sure if he was screaming along with them or not. He couldn't see anything, everything was bright and hot and strange, the world was twisting around him, his gun was raised but it was useless, he was useless.

It was then the the ghosts parted, and there was Knight, rushing at him with a knife far too fast and he'd never felt anything like that before, never knew what it was to feel skin and muscle tearing in the wake of a blade, never knew what it was to reach up and feel the insides of you threatening to spill out. He opened his mouth to speak but he had no control of his body anymore, he was falling, Knight was catching him, his voice filling Levi's mind. "I have you what you wanted," he said, "You can sleep now, Little Warrior."

Levi opened his mouth, tried to speak, to ask where the ghosts had gone, to ask if he was dying but he knew the answer. He could feel his insides sliding out of the jagged tear in his belly, and hot tears poured down his cheeks. They had failed. It was over. They had failed. Erwin was dead. He was dying.

They had failed.

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Erwin stared down at the mess before him, Janus' body twisted at a strange angle, the back of his head blown wide open by the force of the bullet. Erwin had shot him at point-blank range, just before his knife sunk into Erwin's chest cavity and found his heart. His breath was coming in gasps, and he would have to step through the gore to leave this hallway, to get to Levi.

*Levi.*

It took a moment, but Erwin was able to push the shock of it away, was able to step through the blood and tissue and back down the hall, leaving footprints on the Persian carpets as he ran toward the stairs. He had to get to Levi before Knight did.

He ran through the house in a furor, in a blur, down the long staircase, breath coming in gasps and heaves. *The bookshelf.* It was still popped open, archaic torches burning in their sockets. Erwin tore down the stairs without hesitation. His arm ached and throbbed, blood spilling out, dripping from his fingertips, but he had no time to consider it. He stopped at a T in the hallway, tried to decipher where he should go to the left or the right. A ragged shout ripped through the air. Levi. To the right. Erwin ran. He had no time to spare—Erwin had been hunting, he knew the scream of the dying. The word *No* marched through his mind like a mantra. A garbled moan led him down another hallway, a great door looming large at the end. The feasting room.

Erwin pushed through the door with his left side, right arm screaming in pain as he lifted his gun, found Caesar in its sights just he he turned to stare at Erwin dumbly. He was sitting on the floor, Levi's blood-soaked form draped across his lap, middle aged, balding, large brown eyes. He looked so normal, so unassuming.

“Wait,” Caesar started, “But Janus?”

Erwin pulled the trigger, felt no satisfaction as he watched the bullet explode out the back of Caesar’s head, as he watched the body fall.

“Levi!” he yelled, dropping beside him, blood everywhere, his eyes falling to Levi’s stomach, ripped open, his guts barely contained behind one pale, white hand.

“No, no no no no, oh my god, my god, no,” Erwin sobbed, pulling Knight’s dead form away, easing Levi’s body to the floor. “You can’t...no, Levi, what happened? Godammit, What happened to you? You can’t...you...fuck....don’t die, please don’t fuckin’ die.” He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, his shaking, bloody fingers finally seeking Levi’s pulse. He felt something, a fluttering so faint he wasn’t sure if he could trust it or if it was just his own pounding heart.

“Don’t leave me, goddammit,” he said, whispered, pled, “Hang on, ambulance’ll be here soon, Levi, please...yer such a stubborn son of a bitch, just hold on. You have to, Levi... please...for me, for me, hold on.”

## Chapter End Notes

Special thanks, as always, to my co-author [shingekinofreiheit](#) and my beta [poinsonoushamsters](#).

# In the Hushing Dusk

## Chapter Summary

Erwin took the cup, sipped at the liquid inside. He felt sluggish, like he was pushing through a thick fog, but things were coming back to him a bit at a time. All at once, he shot straight up in bed, the speed of the movement sending his head spinning, sending fire down his arm. “Levi?” he asked, ignoring the pain. “Is Levi alive?”

Jackie drew a breath, pursed her lips. In those scant seconds, Erwin felt himself come unravelled, unglued. He didn’t have time to form a coherent thought, only to feel his stomach drop out, only to see his world go dark around the edges. Then she spoke.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He remembered sirens. He remembered screaming for help. He remembered Levi’s skin going pale and clammy, remembered blood everywhere, and being unsure who it belonged to. There were paramedics, then a helicopter...Hange had come through after all. They loaded him up in an ambulance, and he kept insisting he was fine, just fine, and then he insisted more loudly, more forcefully, but he’d lost so much blood and the world was swimming, fading, going dark. The last thing he remembered was the shaking of the ambulance as it drove over country roads, and how every bump and jolt sent fire through his limbs. Then, there was nothing.

He wasn’t sure how long it had been when he opened his eyes, but it must have been night—the only light in the room came from a bedside lamp’s soft glow. In a chair in the corner, the lamplight caught the golden tones in Jackie’s hair, gilded her features. She was sleeping, chin to chest, and Erwin felt himself slipping away again.

This time, he dreamed.

It wasn’t coherent, just flashes of things real and imagined, of Janus’ deceptively tender face and the way pieces of his brain painted the wall and floor, of Levi’s hand over the dark, slippery snakes of his intestines, but also of the smiling faces of their fellow detectives, the grill, the Delta land, a cabin in the woods around Lake Peigneur, a knife protruding from Levi’s thigh, Ice’s eyes, wide and begging, a childhood scene from vacationing on the lake, that same lake, later, with his girls. Eventually, it all fell into abstraction, a gameshow host asking him to name five angels for a hundred thousands dollars, a man whose head kept twisting around with a different expression for every revolution, a small black cat that whispered secrets in his ear, an elevator that wouldn’t stop moving, doors never opening, a flat disk on a string, ever spinning. At one point, the pain became great enough to wake him, and he must have cried out, because he heard Jackie ask someone for morphine. Morphine.

His arm. He wondered, briefly, what had happened to him, but then he was consumed with questions about Levi. He tried to move his lips, his mouth, tried to form his tongue around those syllables, around the question his body asked with every heartbeat, but all that came from him was a slur, nonsense, and Jackie was hushing him, telling him to sleep, to rest.

For awhile, he roamed dark hallways with stone walls, dotted with torches, the air tinged with smoke. “Levi?” he called, but no voice reached back to him. “Levi?”

Light broke through the darkness, and for a moment, Erwin felt trapped in some type of limbo, voices swirling together until they coalesced into one word — his name. Slowly, he blinked, eyes opening, eventually focusing on the image of Jackie, who leaned over him. Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, not a bit of makeup on her face. She looked like she was in her work scrubs, exhaustion coloring her features, shadows settling into the lines of her face.

“Erwin, it’s me,” she murmured. “Yer in tha hospital in Lafayette.”

Awareness washed over him in waves, his tongue thick and dry, his head pounding. “How long?” he croaked out, the words scraping through his throat like so much gravel.

“How long ya been out, ya mean?” she asked. He nodded.

“‘Bout...three days. Well, two an’ a half. They had ya in surgery fer ‘bout five hours that firs’ night. Ya been out ever since, but ya got restless jus’ now, an’ I was worried ya might rip out yer IV line. Here,” she poured water into a cup with a plastic straw and handed it to him. “Sip this slowly.”

Erwin took the cup, sipped at the liquid inside. He felt sluggish, like he was pushing through a thick fog, but things were coming back to him a bit at a time. All at once, he shot straight up in bed, the speed of the movement sending his head spinning, sending fire down his arm. “Levi?” he asked, ignoring the pain. “Is Levi alive?”

Jackie drew a breath, pursed her lips. In those scant seconds, Erwin felt himself come unravelled, unglued. He didn’t have time to form a coherent thought, only to feel his stomach drop out, only to see his world go dark around the edges. Then she spoke.

“He ain’t in good shape, Erwin.”

“But he’s still alive?”

“Yeah he is...fer now. He’s in a coma, Erwin. An’ they’re keepin’ ‘im under a couple’a more days. They ain’t sure if ‘e’s gonna wake up. He lost a lot of blood. They life-flighted ‘im here, an’ ‘e spent tha whole damn night in surgery. It’s practically a miracle ‘is hearts still beatin’...but whether ‘e wakes up ‘er not...I mean, it’s a real crapshoot.”

“But he’s alive,” Erwin whispered, letting the words roll off of his tongue, savoring the way they felt in his mouth.

“Yeah,” Jackie nodded, “He’s alive.”

Erwin laid back, took a breath, let it out slowly. “Jacks, I...”

“I really don’ need another apology from you,” she shot back quickly, lips pressed into a line. “I’ve had about all tha ‘I’m sorries’ I can stand. I don’t...I dunno know if I’ll ever forgive ya, Erwin Smith. I dunno if I got it in me ta do it. I try ta be a good person, a good Christian, but ya really...this is...”

“It’s okay,” Erwin broke in. “I don’...I don’ wanna lose mah girls. But I’d be a hell of an ass if I expected you...not ta pursue yer own happiness. I don’ know what’s gonna happen ta me, but I know ya don’ owe me nothin’, an’ I respect that. Jus’ please...please don’ take away my girls, Jackie. ”

Jackie stood back for a second, tears collecting in the corners of her bloodshot eyes, pooling as she swallowed thickly. Finally, she said, “We can talk about it later...jus’ sleep fer now. You got a lot’a healin’ ta do.”

Erwin wanted to argue, but the fatigue was pulling him under. He nodded and, with the knowledge that Levi was still breathing, let himself fall back into sleep.

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The next time he awoke, Jackie was nowhere to be seen. Pixis was there, though, waiting in the chair, occupying his fingers with a pen and a legal pad. Erwin blinked slowly.

“Hey, Chief,” he said, trying to make his tone easy, though his voice felt like sandpaper in his throat. He poured himself some water, sipped at it. Whatever Pixis wanted, he didn’t want to come at him guns-blazing with ‘I-told-you-so’s’ until he knew.

“Mornin’, Erwin,” Pixis replied, sighing before he raised his eyes to meet Erwin’s gaze. “That was quite a feat ya’ll pulled off then, wasn’ it? An’ all without yer badges or any backup’a any kind.”

Erwin frowned. “Yer gonna be a hardass about this then? Do I need’ta getta lawyer, Chief?”

“I don’ think that’ll be necessary, quite,” Pixis shook his head, pursed his lips. “See, the way we figger, this thing’ll blow up with scandal an’ corruption if ya tell the press tha whole truth. An’ if ya did that, yer life might have an eruption of it’s own.”

The look he fixed on Erwin then was imbued with a meaning that he understood all too well. “Seein’ as we all got skeletons in our closets, an’ seein’ as yer hurt, an’ seein’ as yer partner might not wake up, I don’ figger there’s any need fer us not ta cooperate.

“An’ jus’ how do ya’ll expect me ta cooperate?”

“You’ll tell the press ya’ll caught ‘im by doin’ regular ol’ police work, ya ain’t implicatin’ anybody unless we say ya are, ya ain’t tellin’ nobody about Arkansas’r tha fact ya’ll got yer badges taken, an’ yer retirin’ on account’a yer injury. Ya tell tha press ya don’ much feel like talkin’, an’ this story never gets turned into no true crime shit.”

“Did ya watch tha tape yet, Chief?” Erwin asked, sipping at his water.

“What’s that got ta do wi-...”

“Did ya watch it?”

“Didn’ see as I had much of a choice.”

“An’ ya want the mayor an’ all them baby-rapin’ sons of bitches ta walk? Is that it? What if lil’ Matilda was yer gran-daughter, you think you’d want her ta b-...”

“Erwin,” Pixis cut in, one hand held up. “Ya ain’t the only one with a flame bein’ held ta yer balls, here. Trus’ me when I say ya’ll wanna take this deal. I can’t make no promises fer what’ll happen when it’s off tha table, ya hear?”

Pixis sighed, stood slowly. He looked strangely old in a way he never had before. Erwin opened his mouth to speak, but he still felt strange, fuzzy from the drugs, and he wasn’t sure what he would say anyway. He’d understood the threat, though Pixis hadn’t said it aloud. He’d understood it like crystal.

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“Well, Detective Smith, yer a lucky man,” the doctor started, flipping through his charts. Erwin was slowly regaining his hold on time—it was the fifth day since the mansion. Levi was still comatose. Erwin’s pain was significant, but, the doctor explained, with proper physical therapy, he’d probably regain most of the movement in his arm. The nerve damage was significant, the muscle and blood vessel damage was severe, but the surgery had gone smoothly. He would be “okay,” whatever that meant. Erwin nodded though the doctor’s speech, wincing as he flexed his fingers.

“When can I go see mah partner?” he asked, interrupting. The doctor grimaced.

“Well...he’s in the ICU. We’re still waiting for him to wake up. The damage was severe, Detective Smith.”

“Jus’ call me Erwin,” he replied, thumbing at the tape that held his IV down. “I ain’t no detective no more. An’ maybe it’ll...maybe it’ll help ‘im wake up if’n’e hears a familiar voice, ya know?”

“He jus’ needs ta be a little more stable,” the doctor said with a smile. “If ‘e makes it through tha night, maybe a nurse can wheel ya up there tomorrow.”

Erwin was too tired, too drugged to argue. He nodded, relaxed back into his bed. “Ya know if Jackie’s comin’?” he asked. The doctor looked a little nervous, busied himself with his papers.

“Uh, well. Mrs. Smith....Jackie...she said ta call ‘er if ya need ‘er but....only...only if ya need ‘er. It’s probably better if ya jus’...let ‘er...handle it in ‘er own way.”

Erwin wondered how much, exactly, the doctor knew. After all, the hospital was Jackie’s domain, not his. He nodded. “Yeah, alright.”



The doctor muttered this and that, promised to send a physical therapist later, and went on his way. It could have been boredom, exhaustion, depression...Erwin wasn't sure what eventually allowed him to sleep, but sleep he did. As he slept, he dreamt of Levi, Levi, Levi.

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The next day, Erwin did each exercise he was given quite obediently. He ate his food, he resisted the urge to press the button that dripped morphine into his IV line, he made nice with the nurses and generally acted the model patient. Around mid-afternoon, they finally came to wheel him to the ICU.

"Just a few minutes, okay, Erwin?" the nurse said.

"Sure," he agreed, but it wasn't a promise. His fondness for rules these days was somewhat diminished, after all, and frankly, he'd waited long enough. They wheeled him through the door. Air pushed out through his mouth, but it was as if he couldn't get a breath, the edges of his vision going dark as his eyes focused only on their target: Levi.

He was pale, almost as pale as the sheets around him, his cheeks and eyes sunken and hollow looking. Tubes went down his throat, under his nose, into his veins, medicine dripping, oxygen pumping, machines beeping. Erwin caught the violet shadows settled beneath his eyes, breath still tangled with a sob. Discovering that Levi's heart was still beating had sated him for awhile, despite Jackie's cautious words, despite the doctor's lack of confidence. Now, seeing him like this, Erwin realized just how dire his situation truly was. Seeing him like this, Erwin realized that he may not ever see him another way. The reality of it was almost more than he could bear, and he stood slowly, the nurse's protests unheeded, unheard.

Unsteady but determined, he walked over to Levi, brushed his dark hair from his brow, reached for his hand. His skin was dry, lips flaking around their tube, and Erwin felt something overcome his grief, if only for a moment.

"Can ya get 'im some chapstick'r somethin'?" Erwin asked, looking back at the nurse.

"If ya sit down in yer chair like I asked ya to, I'll get ya some Vaseline."

"Fine," Erwin said, "But can ya wheel it up close, please?"

He didn't mean for his voice to crack at the end of that request, but there was nothing to be done. The state of Levi, the look of him made it impossible to maintain distance, and for the first time, Erwin realized that all the medical intervention in the world might not save him. He understood Jackie's reticence, the doctor's. He understood their worried looks. He understood that he may never see Levi again, not as he remembered him, vibrant and brave, stubborn and beautiful, gentle and deadly, crude and secretly kind. He lowered himself into his chair, rolled it as close to the bed as he could get it, and locked the wheels. The nurse brought the Vaseline, spread a thin layer on Levi's lips. Erwin thanked her, and in the most charming way he could manage, asked to stay with Levi, just for a little while. It was visiting hours, he reasoned. He was stuck in this hospital too. She agreed, *just for a little while*, and left them in peace.

It was only then that Erwin wept.

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The thing about comas, Erwin learned, was that they didn't really end all at once or in predictable ways. The nurses taught him about the Glasgow scale, about how they were testing Levi to see if they could take out his tubes, testing to see his responses, his brain activity. Erwin whispered to Levi that he had to fight, that he had to come back, that he wasn't allowed to wander around that labyrinth forever. Sometimes he got angry and stopped whispering altogether. Sometimes he felt a paradoxical fury when he stared at Levi's blank, impassive face. Sometimes he wanted to shake him, yell, but he didn't. He wasn't a madman, after all, not even in grief.

One day, Jackie brought the girls to see him. They jostled his arm but he didn't complain, just held them both as tight as he could manage until they squirmed away, just answered their questions as best he could, just tried not to wince when they asked when he was coming home. Eventually, Jackie sent them to the vending machines with handfuls of coins and handed Erwin a thick manilla envelope.

"I tried ta be as fair as I could," she said. Her jaw was set. "I ain't stoopin' ta yer level. Read 'em over after we leave. I'd prefer it if ya didn' get a lawyer involved but...I ain't gonna try an' stop ya."

Erwin wished he'd had something stiffer than apple juice to drink. He just nodded tightly, and when the girls came back, he kissed their heads until they laughed and wriggled away. He read the papers later at night, when the hospital was quiet and he was alone. Jackie hadn't been shy - alimony, child support, the house, her car—all that he could stomach, even if it was going to leave him strapped for cash. It was the custody agreement that really rankled, with Jackie taking full custody, with Jackie the sole arbiter of his relationship with his girls. He wanted to fight it, but he didn't have a chance, and he didn't want to hurt the girls...still, the grief at the thought of losing them was near-unbearable, and it wasn't long before he pushed himself out of bed and made his way to the room where Levi was lying, still comatose.

Days had passed since the first time he'd been wheeled up to this room; the tubes had been reduced down to an IV and an oxygen line running just beneath Levi's nose. Still, his skin was pale, eyes sunken, his body looking strangely slight beneath the blankets that covered him. Erwin was getting used to the sight of him, but he hated himself for that adaptability. Levi's coma was a thing that he never should have accepted as fact. If he accepted it, he feared it might never end, and the thought of that final indignity, the thought of Levi's body wasting away, the thought of him trapped between the world of the living and the dead left Erwin scared, aching. He deserved so much more than that. He deserved such a better life than that, a better death, a better end. He deserved to go out guns blazing, swift vengeance flowing through his limbs, an angel of death, a harbinger of judgement. This...this wasn't any life or death at all.

Staring at him, Erwin felt strangely guilty. He'd come to talk to Levi's still form about his own woes, about Jackie and his girls, about his impending divorce, about how he wasn't sure where he would go when he left this hospital, but Levi filled the field of his vision, overcame

his trepidation, his lonely whining. What right did he have? He was awake. He may have lost everything, but he was awake, alive. Perhaps he needed to give Levi a reason to wake up too.

“Listen,” he murmured softly. “Levi, listen.”

He drew closer, cupped Levi’s face in his good hand. “I know ya needed that rest, an’ I think it’s good ya slept this long. We all know yer gonna be all piss’n’vinegar when ya wake up, so it’s better ya slept. But now...now ya gotta wake up. I-...” he stopped, looked around. The door to the room was closed and it was late—there was no one there to hear him—even so he felt vulnerable, naked, exposed.

“I know it got...sorta lost, ya know, in tha shuffle, all tha shit that happened between us. But before...well, that night, tha night Jackie kicked me out? Ya said some things. Ya said...ya said I needed ta make up mah damn mind, an’ I know you was right. Ya said ya weren’t no good bet, an’ I should try’n go back ta Jackie if’n I wanted mah life back. An’ I...I thought about it, I really did. I thought about that life’n all it held. I...I’ll always love Jackie. An’ I’ll always love mah girls. I need ‘em, Levi. It ain’t right fer a daddy ta walk out on ‘is kiddos, an’ that’s jus’ that. But I made a mistake...I thought...I thought if I tried hard enough, I could be all they was needin’, that I could...push some’a that shit to tha side, keep it in tha shadows. An’...ya know, I thought I could do that ta you too. I thought I could go ahead an’ do as I pleased with ya, jus’ like them boys in tha woods, and still have it all. I...I’m realizin’ now how stupid I was.

“Ya gotta know somethin’ though, an’ that’s...I didn’ expect...I...” Erwin flexed his hand - it was shaking - and clenched his jaw. He took a deep breath, looked around again, and then leaned down close to Levi’s ear. “Ya gotta know I didn’ expect ta fall in love with you, Levi.” He exhaled, shaky, swallowed. “There. I said it, didn’ I? I don’ know when it started ‘er when it happened ‘er how, I jus’ know I ain’t never felt this way before, not fer anyone. I can’t... I’m on fire every time I lookit you, when I think about how ya move, the way ya taste...it ain’t jus’ about sex though, an’ that’s that thing. It ain’t jus’ sex. An’ I dunno...I dunno if I can make any grand declarations, I dunno where life is gonna take us, but ya make me wanna see. I fucked up an’ I lost mah girls, I hurt Jackie. I ain’t gonna promise I won’t fuck up again. But maybe you can love me anyway. Maybe that’s jus’ more selfishness on mah part, but I don’ much care. Jus’...wake up, an’ let me figger tha rest out with you.”

Levi breathed in and out, chest rising and falling softly, again and again. Other than his breathing, he didn’t move. Maybe it had been stupid to expect anything else. Maybe it had been stupid to take so long to say those words. Maybe it was just too late. Broken and wrung out, Erwin got lost in the rise and fall of Levi’s chest, floating along on the sound of Levi’s breathing until a nurse came in and shooed him away.

He was gone when Levi’s fingers curled into a fist.

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“Time ta get up, Erwin!” The morning nurse was cheerful. Erwin didn’t mind. It was harder and harder to get up these days, now that his sleep was haunted with nightmares, now that his waking hours were plagued with uncertainty.

“I got some good news, hun. Yer gettin’ discharged today! Jackie dropped off yer truck las’ night, an’ tha doctor says there ain’t no reason ya can’t do yer physical therapy at home. We jus’ gotta check yer sensation an’ movement one more time, an’ ya gotta promise you’ll take care’a yerself an’ do yer exercises okay?”

Erwin nodded, but his gut felt heavy. “Thanks, Molly,” he replied, forcing a smile over his lips. “Sorry, but do ya got any news on mah partner?”

“Well,” she stopped, looked around, and then turned to him and dropped her voice. “His numbers’r gettin’ better. Doc says he ain’t sure ‘e’s gonna get up, but...but there’s a chance. His eyes opened again this morning, an’ e’s withdrawin’ from pain stimuli...so that’s a good sign. Plus, ‘is scar’s healin’ up nice an’ doc says ‘is GI’s gonna recover from tha surgery jus’ fine, if ‘e’s careful ‘bout eatin’ right at first. It ain’t...I can’t make no promises, Erwin, but it ain’t hopeless.”

Erwin nodded, taking in the information and filing it away.

“Do...do ya got a place ta go?” she asked, her voice gentle.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Yeah, I do.”

It was late afternoon by the time they finally let him go, and despite the pain of the bumpy streets, Erwin made the familiar drive to Levi’s townhouse. Pixis had promised him that Levi’s truck would be parked in front, keys in the glovebox, and he’d come through. He opened the door slowly, half-expecting Levi to be standing there, gun cocked, but of course he was not. Instead he saw the tell-tale signs of another person all through the apartment; clearly, Hange had tried to clean the place up a bit, keep it in order. He wondered how much they knew. On the counter he found a note in messy handwriting, *Call me. H.*

“I will,” he muttered out loud. It was just that he was so, so tired. He stumbled over to the bed, shucked off most of his clothes, and collapsed into it. Surrounded by the smell of Levi, surrounded by the memories buried in this mattress, these blankets, these walls, Erwin slept.

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He woke up to the ringing of the phone.

The room was dark, lit by nothing more than the orangey glow of streetlamps outside. He’d been dreaming of Levi, his arm stretching out from the darkness and reaching to find Erwin’s own. He’d been so close, *so close* to grasping Levi’s hand when he’d been yanked back into the black, and now he felt disoriented, strange. The ringing of the phone was insistent, however, and eventually Erwin pulled himself from the mattress and found the receiver.

“Hello?” he asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Hey there, Big Man.”

Erwin sighed. “Sorry I didn’ call. Wasn’t feelin’ too hot. Ya alright?”

“Always. An’ it’s okay, but I thought ya might wanna know ‘e’s sayin’ yer name.”

It took Erwin a few moments to process. “What?” he asked, unsure. “Huh?”

“Levi. Ya know, little guy? Yer partner?”

“He’s awake?”

“Well, kinda. Doc says e’s takin’ ‘is time, but ‘e was lucid fer a couple’a minutes, an’ ‘e asked fer you by name.”

“Is ‘e awake now?”

“Nah, ‘e fell back under. But it’s a good sign, Big Man. It’s tha best sign we had since ya’ll got admitted.”

“No kiddin’,” Erwin said, his heart racing. “I...I gotta get over there.”

“It’d be better fer you ta rest. Them nurses’r pretty strict about visitin’ hours, ya know, an’ it’s past ten o’clock.”

“Are ya in town, Hange?”

“Nah, I been comin’ off’n’on but I didn’ figger ya’ll’d wanna see me.”

“Well,” Erwin said, “Ya figgered wrong. I’m sure Levi’d love ta see ya, an’ I figger I would too.”

“Is that a fact?” Hange asked, their tone light. “Well I’ll be.”

“It’s ‘cause’a you we’re alive right now,” Erwin said. “I reckon I owe you one helluva thank you.”

“I reckon so. Figger you’ll return tha favor someday.”

“Gladly.”

“Alright Big Man. Take care’a yerself. An’ tomorrow....tell ‘im I said hi, will ya?”

“Course I will.”

With that they hung up, but Erwin held the phone a little longer. He hadn’t anticipated the loneliness of this, and though the news about Levi was good, a part of him was too afraid to believe it. He had no logical reason to deny it, it wasn’t as though Hange would lie to him about it, but he felt strangely cold, and so, so alone. After all, a few minutes of lucidity didn’t mean that Levi was better, or that he ever would be better. Sometimes, a few minutes of lucidity was all anyone got. And if Levi didn’t wake up...he didn’t want to consider it, but he couldn’t help himself. Couldn’t stop considering it, really. With a sudden surge of—recklessness? curiosity? he wasn’t sure—he grabbed up his scrub pants, pulled on a loose shirt, and eased a jacket over his bad arm. He still had some unfinished business, and it needed to be addressed.

Twenty minutes later he was at Mike's house, knuckles hovering over the door. He took a deep breath, let it out, and knocked until he heard stirrings inside. Mike answered the door in sweatpants and nothing else, stared at Erwin in a sort of dumb shock. It took him a moment to gather himself, but finally he said, "Come on in, I guess."

Erwin nodded, followed him inside, shut the door.

"How ya doin', Mike?"

"I'm fine," Mike said dismissively, pulling two beers out of the fridge. "Why're ya here?"

"That how it's gonna be then?" Erwin asked, reaching up to grasp the beer with his good hand as Mike handed it to him. "Yer jus' gonna be done with me?"

"If yer gonna be throwin' pity parties, I ain't askin' ta be invited." Mike said softly, shrugging. Erwin followed him onto his back porch, each of them slipping into the chairs they'd unofficially claimed on a hundred other nights. Erwin wondered if he'd ever sit in this chair again. Mike lit a cigarette, handed him the pack. Erwin took one of his own, reached a hand for the lighter. Mike obliged. They flowed together the way they always had, but it was different in a way Erwin couldn't quite pinpoint. He sucked a drag from his cigarette, let the smoke tumble out of his mouth slowly.

"That's nice," he murmured. Mike grunted noncommittally.

"Did ya...did ya really know I was a homo all them years?"

Mike swallowed, rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. Erwin felt the pit in his stomach grow deeper, but he just took a drag off his cigarette and set his mouth in a line.

"Yeah," Mike finally answered. "I mean, I knew you was doin'...stuff with guys. I didn't figger it was worth mentionin' s'long as ya didn't try nothin' on me."

Erwin chuckled mirthlessly, shook his head. "If I'd thought I could'a done, I would'a."

"Well, I ain't a fag."

"Yeah," Erwin muttered, "I know. But I loved you fer a long time, Mike. A damn long time. I guess maybe a part'a me wondered if ya could feel tha same, even though you weren't no fag."

"Ya really come all tha way here ta tell me this shit?" Mike said, his voice soft, but serious. "Or ya got somethin' else ta say ta me?"

"Jackie's leavin' me."

"Seems ta me it was you that left."

"Maybe so. But Pixie's sayin' I'm gonna retire on account'a mah arm. An'...an' Jackie's takin' full custody. Ain't no judge in the county gonna side with me if'n she tells'em tha truth, so I ain't thinkin' I'll be fightin' it."

“Yeah? Was ‘e worth it, then?”

“C’mon,” Erwin said, “Ya can’t blame my...lifestyle on him, ya know. Ya said yourself I was this way fer a long time. I know it weren’t fair, me doin’ what I did ta Jackie. I jus’...I didn’ know what else ta do.”

Mike was silent, smoking. Erwin felt like he was edging into dangerous territory, now, but he kept going anyway. Couldn’t stop himself.

“I don’ figger I’m gonna stick aroun’ here. Dunno if Levi’s gonna come with me’r not, now, not after...everythin’. But I don’t figger I got much of a chance ‘round here.”

“I reckon yer right,” Mike muttered. “But why’re ya tellin’ me?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Erwin shot back, his tone getting sharper. “Figgered ya might give half a damn. I must’a overestimated a couple’a decades’a friendship, though. My apologies.”

Mike snorted. “I told ya I weren’t here fer no pity party, Erwin. Ya made yer bed. If ya ain’t happy ‘bout lyin’ in it, that ain’t no skin off’a my nose.”

Erwin nodded. “Well, guess I’m done here. Jus’ wanted you ta know I ain’t stickin’ around’s all. I ain’t gonna bother you again.”

“You know tha way out,” Mike said. Erwin nodded, stood, put out his cigarette and made his way back into the house. As he passed through, a picture on the mantle caught his eye. It was him and Mike, young, vibrant, posing goofily, decked in Mardi Gras beads. In one quick motion he took it, tucked it into his coat. He didn’t figure Mike would much care for it, anyway.

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He was the ocean, he was the breeze. He was the unknowable depths of a lake that drained like a bathtub years before, he was the endless green of the delta, he was the Spanish moss hanging from the trees, the fog over the Arkansas mountains. He was everything and nothing, darkness and light, death and life. At first he fought it, at first he struggled against the lead weight that anchored him in those dark depths, but eventually the fight left him, eventually he gained some sort of awareness that he could let himself float along in this purgatorial world, that here there were no ghosts, no Knights or gangs or dead children. Here it was him, only him, him and a soft sort of nothingness. So he breathed, and thought about nothing at all.

It could have been days, weeks, could have been centuries, he wasn’t sure, couldn’t be sure. All he knew was that somewhere, people were talking around him. He wished that they would shut up and leave him be.

More time passed, he floated in and out, above and around. Sometimes, he could see himself lying in a hospital bed. Sometimes, Erwin was there. He wondered if it was all a dream. When Erwin spoke, he caught words here and there, and he listened, wondered if this was real at all, or if this was what death felt like. Maybe instead of seeing your life flash before your eyes, you just saw what might have been. What could have been.

But this overblown fantasy was insistent, with nurses prodding him and poking him, talking about their lives, their dramas, a cast of characters in a play that Levi had never seen, would never see. And there was Erwin, again and again, sometimes talking, sometimes saying nothing at all. When Erwin made that room his confessional, spoke love into the hollow space of Levi's chest, Levi found himself wondering if that weight was still there, if it would still hold him down so insistently. Slowly, tentatively, he began to test it, to struggle against the nothingness. But it was black tar on a summer day, sticky, thick, and clinging. He lost track of time. Erwin was gone.

*Wake up*, he heard Erwin's voice whisper.

*I'm trying*, he muttered, whispered, spoke, screamed. I don't know how.

I don't know how.

He heard his name, felt the poking and prodding of the nurses.

"He's moving," one of them said. She sounded serious. "Upgrade motor response to a four."

"His eyes are fluttering," another said, "I think he can hear you."

He heard his name, but the voices were fading. That black tar was swallowing him alive again, and Levi felt too tired to fight it.

The next time it happened, the voices came in louder. Erwin was there. He was making some promise, being charming. Levi smiled, or thought he did, anyway. It was hard to tell, and he'd never been good at smiling anyway.

Slowly, bit by bit, the black tar lost its grip. He couldn't decipher one part of himself from another, not in this formless void. There were no arms, no legs, no fingers and toes unless the nurses poked at them. Still, he knew he was pushing out of the tar, bit by bit. The first time he opened his eyes, he could see himself opening them, as if he were floating from above. Perhaps...perhaps he had not managed to die after all. Perhaps the hospital, the nurses, Erwin—perhaps it was all real. The room was empty. He was under again.

He began to experiment, pushing himself up this way and that, fighting to move when the nurses poked him, talked to him. He was making his way back, now, and the nurses were telling him what day it was, how long he'd been there. The line between what was real and what was false began to coalesce and he knew—gradually, not all at once—that he had survived. That Erwin had survived. That they had slain the beast.

Then one day, he was able to force a word out through the desert of his throat, was able to croak out a familiar name in an unrecognizable voice, and he was upgraded again just before he fell under. Time passed, the waves crashed and ebbed, and eventually, finally, a large warm hand closed around his own.

"They said you was askin' fer me," Erwin murmured, his voice low. "Please wake up, Levi. Please come back to me."



Levi couldn't be sure what his body was doing—it seemed to have a mind of it's own these days—but Erwin gasped, squeezed his hand tightly.

“That's it, Levi,” he said, his voice excited. “Come back ta me now.”

But it wasn't that easy. Didn't Erwin understand? It just wasn't that easy. He was tired, incredibly so, and the tar was pulling him under again.

Erwin came to see him again, and then again. On the third visit, he was awake enough to whisper Erwin's name up to him, to open his eyes and look into Erwin's face. Levi was surprised by the tears in his eyes.

“Yer comin' back ta me, ain't ya?” Erwin whispered.

Levi tried to say *I'm trying*, but all he could manage was a groan.

“Good enough.” Erwin said, “I'm waitin'. Keepin' yer place in order. Hange's comin' ta see ya tomorrow. Figger ya might wake up if we're both here.”

Levi tried to nod, but his head just rolled to the side.

“It's alright,” Erwin whispered. You'll get there.”

And he did. Slowly, day by day. At first he could speak only a few words, and then a few more. At first, he could only twitch his hands and feet, but then he could lift his arms, move his fingers. At first, he could stay aware for only minutes or seconds, but then it became half an hour, and sometimes even an hour if Erwin was there. Erwin came and tried to be brave and nonchalant but Levi understood. He saw Erwin's life falling apart in the ways his mouth quirked at the corners, in the depths of his eyes. Eventually, Erwin delivered the news of his retirement, his divorce. Levi nodded, concentrated on getting a spoon to make the insurmountable journey from his plate to his mouth. Coming back from the dead made him wonder, made him think. He didn't believe in fate or reason since both had failed him, but he found solace in the way that Erwin seemed to be solidifying, in the way that his mouth set and his eyes hardened, softened, hardened again.

They were changed, not for better nor for worse, just changed.

A month passed before Levi was able to leave the hospital, though he was given a strict regimen of physical and occupational therapy to follow and a long calendar of follow up appointments. On the way out the door, he tried to throw them away, but Erwin stopped him.

“I want ya takin' care'a yerself,” he said, jaw set. “Yer gonna be right as rain, but not if ya jus' ignore tha docs, ya hear?”

“What about you? Yer still cradlin' yer arm like it's made'a glass.”

“No I ain't,” Erwin shot back, opening the door to Levi's truck and helping him into the passenger seat as best he could with one arm. “I still can't feel it very well, makes me clumsy sometimes is all.”

With Levi buckled in, Erwin walked around to the driver side and swung his way in. He turned the key in the ignition, but as the engine rumbled to life, he leaned forward and opened the glove box. "Hey, I got ya somethin'," he said, pulling out a small, gift-wrapped box. "Merry gettin' outta tha hospital day."

"What the fuck is this," Levi muttered, but a smile crept around the edges of his lips. "Ya fuckin' sentimental old fag."

"Jus' open it, will ya?" Erwin muttered, impatient.

Levi tore away at the plain wrapping paper, stopping to read the name on the box. It was a local jewelry store, and a fancy one at that. He paused, looked up at Erwin with a question in his eyes. Erwin nodded at him, muttered, "Go on."

Levi slid the top off the box, pulled away the white tissue paper, and found himself staring at a pack of Marlboro Lights, nestled in next to his old Zippo.

"You piece'a shit," Levi muttered, cheeks burning. "You know I smoke full-tar."

Erwin chuckled now, a grin breaking out over his lips. "Figgered now's as good a time as any fer cuttin' back," he offered with a shrug.

Levi smacked the pack against his palm before opening it, tapped out a cigarette, and lit it. He closed his eyes in rapture, tilted his head back against the seat as Erwin put the truck in drive.

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At the townhouse, Erwin settled Levi onto a couch he'd never seen before, then heated up some Campbell's soup for dinner. They slurped at their dinners in relative silence, each feeling unsure of what to do, of where to go from here. Erwin was the first to toe at the gulf between them, to test the waters, to see if it could be crossed.

"Levi," he asked, swallowing down the last bit of his soup. "Did ya....did ya hear tha things I said to you while you was...under?"

Levi was quiet for a moment, then muttered, "Some of it, I reckon."

Erwin waited for him to elaborate, but when it became clear that no further elaborations were to be made, he plowed on. "Listen, I dunno how yer feelin' about it, but I...I've been thinkin' a lot. I wanna...I wanna be with you, Levi. I don' wanna jus' go on our separate ways an'...I don' wanna half ass this thing neither."

Levi set down his spoon and looked up at Erwin, just stared at him for a moment. He let his eyes run over Erwin's face, his cheekbones, his jaw, the bow of his lips, back up to his eyes, his brow, the golden color of his hair. "I'm damaged goods," Levi muttered finally. "We can't go back ta tha force, an' yer free ta do whatever ya want. I ain't sure what makes ya think ya wanna do this, but ya might wanna look at me fer a few minutes. I ain't gonna jus'...settle down ta some peaceful life, Erwin. I'll get itchy, an' I'll need out. There ain't nothin' stable

about me. Yer still young enough, hot enough. Find yerself someone that suits ya an' let me get on with hurtlin' myself into an' early grave, okay?

"Nah," Erwin said, standing up, stretching, and making his way over to the couch where Levi sat. "The way I see it," he started, "Meetin' you was a gift."

Levi snorted. "Oh yeah? Losin' yer family, yer career, yer house, yer ...friends? I ain't heard one word about Mike and Nana and Nile an' all them. Guessin' they don't want ya no more'n tha police does. Yer gonna have ta leave this town, same as me, an' ya ain't gonna be able to get it back, Smith, none'a that. So don' tell me it was gift. I know I ain't the only one responsible but...maybe you should jus' start over an' forget about me, huh?"

Erwin shook his head. "I don't intend fer you ta bear tha burdens'a my mistakes, Levi. Way I figger, ya got enough'a yer own."

Levi pulled out a cigarette, but Erwin plucked it from his hand and set it on the ground beside the mattress.

"Listen, Levi. Jus' fuckin' listen fer a minute. This ain't about me needin' ta sow mah wild oats or tryin'a fina somebody or gettin' shit outta my system or needin' someone ta blame. I did what I did an' I'm payin' tha price. An' I ain't saying you was blameless, but I'm jus' sayin'....I'm just sayin' that I never met no one like you before, and I'm in love with you in a way I never thought I could be, not with no one, not ever. An' I need you ta tell me if yer pushin' me away 'cause ya don' want me, or if it's jus' fear. 'Cause the Levi I know'll run into a burnin' building jus' to find a clue, the Levi I know'll sacrifice damn near anythin' for a lead, an' I jus'...fuck." Erwin rubbed his hand over his mouth, sighed, then started again. "Levi, I want you by mah side. An' if you wanna be there, there ain't nothin' in this world's gonna make me change my mind."

"There's still a lot you don' know about me."

"Then tell me," Erwin shrugged. "Or don't. I don' care. I'll learn it all, if ya give me a chance."

"What're we gonna do? Where we gonna go?"

"Dunno," Erwin shrugged. "We got time ta figger it out, being retired an' all."

For a moment, the look in Levi's eyes was distant, detached. For a moment, Erwin really thought he might say no, that Levi might push him away once and for all, that he might tell him to fuck off or get lost or any number of things. But when Levi's mouth opened, the only words that left it were, "You sure 'bout this?"

Carefully, gingerly, Erwin gathered him up in his good arm, kissed the top of his head as Levi melted into his chest, the warmth of his body reaching all the way to Erwin's bones.

"Yes," he whispered. Then, a few moments later, "I ain't never been so sure about nothin' in my life."

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*Six Months Later.*

“I can not fuckin’ believe yer makin’ me walk aroun’ New Orleans in a fuckin’ blindfold.”

“Oh, c’mon. Ya know it ain’t the weirdest thing these folks seen today.”

“I bet it would be if ya had yer way, ya fuckin’ pervert.”

Erwin laughed, his hands resting on Levi’s shoulders, guiding him down the street. They were only a block away from their destination when he’d tied the blindfold around Levi’s eyes. He might’ve done it sooner, but he knew he wasn’t going to hear the end of it until they arrived. Still, all of Levi’s harrumphing aside, he wanted this to be a surprise. A good surprise. The past few months hadn’t been easy, with physical therapy, court appearances, and moving on two ever-dwindling bank accounts. Jackie had made it clear that Erwin wouldn’t be seeing his girls unless he made the three-hour drive back home—not home anymore, but it was a hard habit to break—and despite all his protests to the contrary, Erwin still wasn’t sure that he wanted to leave Levi completely alone overnight. Sleeping in the same bed made it easier to deal with the nightmares, but neither of them slept very well these days. Still, they were learning one another, learning to flow together, and when Erwin slid his good arm around Levi’s chest and kissed his silky dark hair, he knew that he had been lucky.

“kay, we’re almost there. Are ya ready?”

“I was ready ten fuckin’ minutes ago.”

“Here.”

Erwin removed the blindfold from Levi’s eyes, and Levi’s dark lashes fluttered open. Then, his eyes blew wide. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.”

“When did ya do this?”

“Here an’ there.”

“How’d we afford it?”

“By hook an’ crook. An’ my credit’s still pretty okay, so by bank loan too.”

Levi stared at the dusty little storefront in awe, his mouth open slightly as he turned to look at Erwin, who was grinning so wide his cheeks hurt. On the window facing the street, large gold and black letters read, “Smith & Smith,” then, in smaller letters below, “Private Investigators.”

“I can not believe ya went an’ called it ‘Smith & Smith.’”

“Do ya like it?”

Levi stared at it for a minute, then turned around, looked straight up at Erwin, and said, “You’re a fuckin’ asshole.”

“I knew you’d love it.” Erwin smiled, pulling a small box out of his pocket. “This here’s yer key. I figgered we could come in an’ clean it up tomorrow. I got us a listin’ in tha yellow pages an’ everythin’.”

“Ya really think we can pull this off?”

Erwin looked at the storefront, then looked down at Levi. He cupped Levi’s face in his hands, ignoring the pins and needles that went through his bad arm at the contact. “It’s an adventure, ain’t it?”

“I suppose so,” Levi assented.

“I don’ want ya gettin’ restless, anyway.”

“Somehow,” Levi said slowly, “I don’t think that’s gonna be an issue.”

“Good.” Erwin replied. Then he dropped a kiss on Levi’s lips, right there in front of God and everybody.

“C’mon,” he breathed with a smile. “Let’s go explore our new home away from home.”

“Fine,” Levi muttered.

Erwin could hear the smile, even if he couldn’t see it.

## Chapter End Notes

And it's finished. :')

I really hope that you guys enjoyed this.

Comments are greatly, deeply appreciated. This is the longest, most involved fic I've ever written, and though it was an intense journey, it was also a wonderful one. Thank you so, so much to my beta, [Luca](#), who really helped me to polish so much on this fic. Your feedback made me a better writer, and made this fic much better than it would have otherwise been. And a very special thank you to my co-author and partner, [Will](#), who supported me mentally, emotionally, and creatively, inspired me over and over again, and made this fic something that I think we're both genuinely proud of.

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a long fic, especially when I didn't complete it in time. I really hope that you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you again, everyone!

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